



How Allison Strong Built A Room of Her Own

The actress and singer-songwriter (and Alicia's one-time babysitting charge!) shares the magic of growing up in a matriarchal home, the early negative feedback that nearly destroyed her spirit (and the advice that empowered her to keep going), and the action she took early in the pandemic that allowed her to survive and thrive as an artist.

Alicia Menendez: I have known Allison Strong since she was a little girl belting out songs in her mom's living room in our hometown of Union City, New Jersey. Her talent has always been undeniable and it is matched only by the heart and hustle that has earned her roles on Broadway productions of *Bye Bye Birdie*, and then *Mamma Mia!*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, the Netflix film *The Week Of*, and powered her two albums, including her most recent release *Brontë*. Allison and I talk about the early feedback that threatened to derail her career before it had even begun, the mentor who put it back on the tracks, how her songwriting is informed by everyone from Carlos Vivas to Regina Spektor, and how the decision to literally create a room of her own allowed her to become the hero of her own story.

Allison Strong: Hi, Alicia.

Menendez: I don't think I've ever... I've never had anyone I babysat for on *Latina to Latina*, so what a treat.

Strong: It is a treat. It's a treat for both of us.

Menendez: Allison, we all knew you were talented. Do you remember the first moment when you said to yourself, "Wow, I love this"?

Strong: I'll start by saying that I shied away from crowds from the time I was quite small. I was the kid that waited for everyone to get off of the slide at the playground. My mom would actually have to bribe me to go on the slide. I did not like to be... And I know this probably sounds really weird. Anyone who knows me knows that I'm extremely extroverted at this point in my life, but it didn't start out that way. And my mom, being a good school psychologist, put me in musical theater classes. And imagine this kid from Union City who has immigrant parents who didn't really even know what musical theater was. All of a sudden I was exposed to Rodgers & Hammerstein, musicals like *The Fantasticks*. I'm listening to all of this music and I started to sing in the car and I wouldn't get a solo. No one gave it to me.

I asked my mom, "Please, can you talk to my teacher, ask her what I need to do to make this to happen?" And with much reluctance, she gave me a solo. I sang my song, and afterwards all of the parents and grandparents at our student showcase went up to my mom and they said, "She's going to be on Broadway one day." I don't think it was something that I recognized at the time. I was more myself on stage than anywhere else. And so in a way, the stage I think helped me become

more of who I am. That's where it all began. From there, my mom put me in voice lessons. I started doing singing competitions and pretty much winning every single one that I entered at the state level, at the-

Menendez: Well, let's recall the single most important competition you have ever been a part of, which was when Oscar Mayer Wiener decided they needed a new jingle.

Strong: In Spanish.

Menendez: Would you hit it for me in español?

Strong: (Singing Oscar Mayer song). That was that, except I belted it outside of the ShopRite on 35th Street in Union City, the one in Columbia Park. Any hometown peeps will know.

Menendez: Tiny girl, big voice. My God. It was like we knew a national celebrity. Allison Strong was chosen to be the new jingle singer. I mean, it was town news.

Strong: I will never get away from the Wienermobile, and I don't want to.

Menendez: Imagine there is a moment in the life of every musical theater performer where you have been excellent, you have been superlative, you have been number one in your little world, and then you level up and all of a sudden you're competing in a bigger pond with a different set of people. And I wonder through that audition process and then ultimately becoming a part of the ensemble on Bye Bye Birdie on Broadway, what it required of you to level up into that experience. What was the biggest growing pain?

Strong: A lot of people have the advantages of having had parents that were in the arts, or maybe they grew up in the city. Maybe they knew musicals growing up. I really didn't... What I knew was what I knew from my musical theater troupe. If I refer to my mom and I, it's because we've always been a team in this. We learned a lot. Headshots, we took some bad ones. We eventually got some good ones. In terms of classes, figuring out what is a good teacher, what is not a good teacher? So I don't necessarily know in terms of disadvantages. I just know that my privileges were different than others. My privilege was that I had a mom who cared.

Menendez: I love that answer. Keep that answer. I also, though I'm asking a slightly different question, which is-

Strong: Sure, go for it.

Menendez: ... did you feel out of your depth?

Strong: Culture shock in college was huge for me, not knowing all the musicals that everybody knew, not having all of the cultural markers. I didn't grow up watching MGM movies. I had a lot to catch up on in terms of pop culture. I didn't know the composers that people were singing songs from, but also I think it made me stronger because I wasn't depending on this program to give me everything that I needed. I had always had to supplement everything I did from the time I was a kid with outside training. And so I continued that in school and I took full advantage. I just ate the apple.

Menendez: We've seen you in lots of things. We've seen you in Blacklist as you know, because I screamed into Instagram, screamed when I saw you in Mrs. Maisel. But I think the thing that you're likely to be most familiar to our listeners for is the role that you played in The Week Of, which was a Netflix film. Adam Sandler was the lead. You played his daughter. And I've spoken with a lot of actresses who come from theater and then they do TV or film, and they realize it's just not what they want or what they're built for. Christy Haubegger, who I interviewed very early on in the series, talked about finding your professional metabolism, knowing whether you're a person who wants a project every three years or a person who loves the moment to moment work. And I wonder what that unlocked for you being on the production.

Strong: I've loved cameras my entire life. I recently went through a lot of home videos in the process of creating one of my music videos in the last couple of months, and I found a video where I was on the bed with my cousin, John Carlo. I was probably eight or nine months, and this was in Colombia. My aunt, my [foreign language 00:07:37] was filming. My mom was on the bed. I noticed the camera. I start laughing and I fall towards the camera reaching for it. I have loved it my entire life.

In the Broadway shows I was in, I was in them each for six months. One because our show closed within six months, and the other one because I chose to leave. And I learned for myself, I need variety. I'm a bit of a hummingbird. I love a little variety in my life. And I had been taking TV and film lessons since I was 14. I was actually rejected by an agent when I was 13, and they told me one, teenagers can never be on Broadway. Proved that wrong real fast. And two, that I didn't have the chops for on camera. So I met my mentor because of that bone crushing rejection, Peter Miner, who passed early on in the pandemic. But I had been primed for it. It's something that I'd always wanted, and when it happened, I just loved it.

Menendez: You get crushed by that experience where you're told you don't have it. You're never going to be on TV or film effectively.

Strong: And at 13, so rude-

Menendez: At 13, rude. So rude-

Strong: Yeah.

Menendez: Here's what I want to know. What was it that Peter Miner gave you back?

Strong: He told me that what I was, was perfect and okay. It's not acting. It's being. And what I was and what I am is enough and perfect and okay. A lot of people on this journey will tell you you have to change. And I did a lot of things to try to fit in. I straightened my hair until it fell out. I tried to be thinner. I have the body that I have for whatever reason, and it's just the way that it is. He always told me just, "It's not even about acting, it's about listening. It's about being and who you are is perfect." He also said that if I were the person that... He saw me sing in my live performances when I released my first album. He said, "If you are just that girl who's on stage, in your acting, you will be unstoppable." Be genuine. That's what he meant.

Menendez: Let's talk about that girl you are on stage singing and playing your own music. When you think back, who do you count among your influences musically?

Strong: Summers in Colombia, I would spend with my grandparents, and at your grandparents' house, you watch a lot of TV. So we're talking old school Carlos Vives who's a Colombian singer-songwriter powerhouse. We're talking Shakira in her Alanis stage.

Menendez: The best Shakira.

Strong: Yeah, the best. And Charlie Zaa, who's another amazing singer. And also Enrique Iglesias and Whitney Houston would come on on too, singing Can I Have This Kiss Forever? So I listened to all this mishmash of pop music and folkloric music. But for me, my biggest influence was probably my grandparents singing to a captive audience of me and my cousin at the dinner table singing Pueblito Viejo, which is by José A. Morales. It's a folkloric song from when they were young. So in terms of influence, my family has a lot to do with it. And I will say, even though I'm the first professional artist in my family, we have a lot of people who didn't have the opportunity to pursue it professionally.

Menendez: You also have all of your American girl, Ingrid Michaelson, girl with a guitar stuff.

Strong: Yeah. Well, look, look. I loved, yeah, Ingrid Michaelson, huge. I loved that she created her own narrative. Regina Spektor in that same token, quirky, unique singer-songwriters that started from the ground up on their own. So I really respond to that. I also love more commercial singer-songwriters who started, had humble beginnings. I love Jesse & Joy. If you were to ask me who my favorite singer is, it would probably be Carlos Vives. But for my entire childhood, Shakira. I mean, who doesn't love Shakira? And yeah, I listen to a lot of different stuff. So my mind is a radio.

Menendez: And which is interesting because then your albums end up presenting a little bit like a radio. March Towards the Sun, which you put out in 2014.

Strong: Yeah.

Menendez: It was dual language. I mean, your sophomore album Brontë is predominantly English. There is one Spanish language track. And I wonder when you talk about those influences and then you talk about your two albums, if you can point me to where it is I would find some of those influences on some of your tracks.

Strong: Oh gosh. I think my most recent record Brontë is a better reflection of where I am artistically now and what I've been capable of. But the songs in Spanish on all of my records I feel are probably the heart, the heart of me. "Poco A Poco" on my first record is a tribute to my grandmother Soledad, who would always say in the moments that I'd get frustrated, "Little by little, you'll arrive." That song for me is a bit of a theme song. "La Luna" which is off of Brontë, my most recent record, my grandmother would always say, "Te quiero hasta Plutón y más allá." Which is, "I love you all the way to Pluto and beyond that." And so I tie the magical realism that I grew up with being Colombian into this song, and she becomes the moon for me. She is literally a moon that wakes me up from bed and carries me through the constellations in the darkest night of my life until I'm transformed into the sun.

Clip of song

Menendez: Allison, tell me about the room that you are in right now, because when you popped up on my screen, I was like, "Oh, that is a legit studio."

Strong: Yes.

Menendez: How it came together, and then also the opportunities that the decision to invest in something like that room has afforded you.

Strong: When I was first signed to my agency at 18 years old, it was made very clear to me that I was expected to be a chameleon in many different areas of acting. I couldn't just do musical theater. And once I started working musical theater, you realize very quickly, one, musical theater performers are not paid well enough. But actors in general, it's hard to make a life only focusing on one facet of this industry. So I started doing voiceover and one of the great gifts of my life is being bilingual and also loving Spanish with my whole being, doing Spanish voiceover and English voiceover.

When the pandemic hit, I didn't have a home studio, but I was bored at home and in, I think it was the day that New York shut down, I called my friend before he got furloughed at Guitar Center and I said, "What's your discount?" And that was the start of this studio. I decided to just rip apart my closet and create a space where I could create art during the unimaginable, which was the pandemic. And I've been very fortunate to work on everything from animated films to national campaigns for many brands, and it's been a true blessing to know that I can count on my voice when the world falls apart.

Menendez: Listen, if I listen to Brontë or if I listen to music that you're producing now, what is it telling me about where you find yourself in your life right now?

Strong: This whole record was written during the pandemic. Many of us were running through life. I actually fell and nearly broke off my teeth right before the pandemic. I needed to slow down and I tripped on a bicycle and it forced me to slow down, and then the pandemic hit. And I really had to come to terms with the rejection of the last 10 years and how I had metabolized that and really had to really look at myself and say, "What dreams have I left behind and where did I stop believing in myself?" In many ways, I felt I was more whole as a child, then I started listening to the world and started hearing no and started saying no to myself. And so I just slowed down for real. I started a songwriting group during the pandemic, and we met every Saturday. We still meet every week for disenfranchised creators who felt that they didn't have a home. Called it Right Light. Wrote hundreds of songs in that time, and the theme of those songs was basically slowing down and recognizing the dreams that were left behind.

So this last record that I released called Brontë is about rather than living in your fantasies, which I had been with my music for years, even when I was doing these big movies and walking red carpets and doing all of this great work, I felt that I wasn't really honoring who I was 100%. It's very lyric driven and it's about honoring who you are, being scared and going for it anyway. My music is a homecoming to who I am. I'm really excited. I've been very fortunate in the last couple of months. I opened for Grammy winning artists. I'm about to open for another one next month. I'm opening for LeAnn Rimes actually on the stage where I first sang and realized I could sing, at bergenPAC. So that's a beautiful, beautiful full circle moment for me that in the moment that I started believing in myself again, the universe started supporting me in that area.

Menendez: Allison, this was such a treat. I love you. I am rooting for you always-

Strong: I love you. Thank you, my darling-

Menendez: Thank you.

Strong: Thank you so much. Thank you.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer. Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us at [@latinatolatina](https://www.instagram.com/latinatolatina). Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcast, Google Podcast, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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