



Why Cristela Alonzo's Drive to Make It Is Deeply Personal, Part 2

Cristela Alonzo knows about starting at square one — and then doing it again and again. In the second part of our interview, she talks to Alicia about facing her make-or-break moment, how she “had to go live a life to have things to talk about,” and why she’s back with her new tour “My Affordable Care Act.” She writes about it all in her new memoir, “Music to My Years.”

Clip (Alonzo): *I was doing an hour a night in front of audiences that didn't know me. I talked about being Latina, but I also talked about being Catholic, being from a blue collar family, blah, blah, blah, so I was accidentally building my act. Those college gigs led to me doing a set on Conan, and that Conan set helped me get my development deal for my TV show.*

Alicia Menendez:

This is the second part of my extended conversation with comedian Cristela Alonzo, whose memoir *Music To My Years* was just released. She dedicated a song to each chapter of the book. You'll hear some of those in this episode. We shared the first part of our conversation last week. Cristela told me about her childhood and putting her dreams on hold to care for her ailing mom. In this episode we talk about everything after. Her make or break moment, defining and earning Hollywood success, and her new tour, *My Affordable Care Act*.

You talk about starting at square one and there's just so many times you're back at square one, and part of what is amazing as someone who loves you and roots for you is your ability to go back to square one and start all over again and still have ended up where you ended up. And I think there's this desire to mythologize the story where it's like you go from the diner to the sitcom, you know? Like there's sort of nothing in between.

Cristela Alonzo: Sure.

Menendez: You do such a good job in *Music To My Years* of really laying out in sometimes painful detail, these were the setbacks, this was how it happened and these are the things I stumbled into. And because there is so much struggle, then there is this also moment of great relief, and it happens at a college showcase, and I would love for you to just talk a little bit about that moment you were in and how the tides started to turn.

Alonzo: I was in a really bad depressed phase of my life that was so extreme. I didn't get out of my bed for months. For a long time I would wake up and cry, and at that moment I was at square one because I had opened for this very notable comedian, I was one of two openers, he treated the other opener completely different from me. I always had to prove

myself worthy of having the opportunity, and he ended up having a big scandal where he was accused of stealing material. So I left him, and because he had had this scandal where he was accused of stealing, I was accused of stealing too, by association. So I was shunned by everybody. I couldn't get a job. I didn't work for, I think, two years, and I just thought I was done. At that point I thought, "Well, damn it."

I've stopped my life to take care of my sister's kids. I've stopped my life because my mom was sick. I got this chance to do this standup thing, and that was taken away from me. Why? What did I do to deserve this? What did I do? Two years passed and a friend of mine reached out to me and said, "I want you to meet this person." He was a college agent. The college agent said, "Hey, if you want, I'll submit you to NACA," which is North American College Activities, I think. You would pay to get submitted, you'd submit a five minute set and if they chose you, you would showcase at these conventions where college students went to book acts for their school year. I had no choice. I was like, "Yes, work. Yes, I would love work." And I submitted and I got to showcase.

: I showcased in Wisconsin, I think, that was the first one, I think. And I had booked almost like 60 schools from that one thing. And everybody's like, "What the hell?" Like, "Where did she come from now?" I did well because I was clean. I was a clean comic. I was also booked, I think, a lot of times because I was Latina, so I scratched off two boxes. I was a woman and Latina, Mexican. To the point where I was in a college once in Wisconsin, and after the show you would've thought I was a rock star because everybody kept coming up to me and asking me for my autograph. Halfway through it, I learned the students had to get my signature to prove to their Spanish teachers that they had come to see me because I was part of the diversity thing at so many schools. I would be so booked for Hispanic heritage month around Cinco de Mayo. So that was my life. During those days I was making no money.

: I was getting paid like \$1,000 a night, which sounds like a lot of money, but you have to pay your way, like hotel, airfare, everything to get to it. So there were times where I actually owed money. I would spend \$1,000 getting to the college and back, because some of the colleges were in the middle of nowhere. So Steve, my boyfriend at the time-- he and I were living together--and I told him, "I think we need to move back to Texas." Like, "This isn't happening." I had decided, I'm like, "I just can't do this. I cannot keep working and not have anything come back to me."

We were driving home for the holidays, and I got a call from my agent and he's like, "Hey, you got into the National Convention, do you want to go?" Like, "I think you need to go." Here's the thing, Alicia. I had already gone to a NACA National Convention and I had not booked any gigs, because that year Snooki was at the convention.

Menendez: So for you to go to this again, it's like it's a risk.

Alonzo: It is. It's a big risk. It's a big risk, because I had already seen what had happened and I'm thinking, "Who is going to be my Snooki this year?" And my agent's like, "I think you should do it, blah, blah, blah." And I talked to Steve, and Steve's like, "I guess we should do it." I cashed in all the points I had on my rental car and a hotel room. My boyfriend had to call his parents and borrow money to get airfare to fly me out to North Carolina.

Menendez: So this is it. This is the final card you have to play.

Alonzo: This is it. I'm done. Like after this, I'm done. I went and I was hosting. When you host a showcase, you do 25 minutes of stand up. I get laughs. I feel like I'm doing really well, but I'm not sure. And at the end you have to sell your soul a little bit. You know, you're like, "My name's Cristela Alonzo. I'm at booth 121." Or whatever the hell it was. You really ... It becomes a trade show after this showcase. You have to go to the-

Menendez: If you want to make your Spanish teacher really happy, just swing on by.

Alonzo: Absolutely. Yes. Like my Chips and Salsa Tour 20 or whatever. And I went to the booth and there was a long line. I didn't know who it was for, and I found out that the line was for me. I couldn't understand why they were there, because that kind of stuff didn't happen to me. There were kids, just the students and organizers just giving us sheets. When they want you they give you a white sheet saying that there's like a strong interest. We ended the night, my agent said, "I think you need to stay an extra day." And I thought, "Oh, I don't know if this is possible. Like I can maybe sleep in my car, I don't know, blah blah, blah." You know what I mean? I'm trying to make it happen and I call Steve and I tell him, "Hey, my agent wants me to stay but it's \$150 to change my flight." And he was like, "We're going to let this ride. We're going to do it all. So you have to stay, you have to stay." I was like, "I don't know Steve."

Menendez: I love Steve. Steve is really the hero of this book.

Alonzo: He really is.

Menendez: If I'm Steve, I'm like, "The acknowledgement is not enough. I demand that you re-dedicate this book to me."

Alonzo: The book should be called "Steve's Music To My Ears." I stayed. We calculated that I needed to book nine colleges to make it through a year in LA. Now, our bills were low, so it was like nine schools. I need nine. And I thought that was a magic number because nine is my favorite number. So I thought, "Oh my, that's a sign." The next day, basically it's like contestant eight, nine, dah, dah, dah, dah. Cristela Alonzo, comedian. And in this room there's people that hold paddles up, and it's the colleges that say that they want to book you. And when I walked in people started saying hi to me. Couple of students took pictures of me. They were congratulating me and I thought it was still because of my set or the day before. And I was like, "Wow, this is crazy." And there's a bulletin board where every performer is listed and they tell you ... The number is right there of how many schools you booked. I saw my agent at the bulletin board and he told me, he's like, "You need to look at this."

: I looked at it and the number next to it was 131, and I couldn't understand it. So he told me, he's like, "Cristela, you booked 131 schools. You are no longer going to be broke." There was an empty hallway at this big convention center in Charlotte, North Carolina. And I called Steve, and he's waiting. He wants to hear nine. He's like, "Let's hit nine." I told him, "I booked 131 schools." And the phone went silent. Steve was crying. I was in so much shock that I had asked him like, "What does this mean?" He was just so overwhelmed that he said, "Cristela, this paid off. We don't have to move to Texas anymore. We're going to be good." And I said, "But I wanted nine." And he was like, "You got your nine, and you got so much more than nine." And I remember at that moment, because he and I had struggled so much, that's when it hit me, and I started crying and I just like fell to the ground. I was on my knees. I couldn't stop crying.

Menendez: (singing).

Alonzo: Throughout these college gigs, I was going to states like Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas. People were ... They always assume that because I'm Latina, I can't play those states. So I was doing all these gigs on these states and what I didn't realize I was doing was that I was actually strengthening my stand up. I was doing an hour a night in front of audiences that didn't know me. I never really relied on the Latino stuff in a lot of ways that a lot of other people did.

I talked about being Latino, but I also talked about being Catholic, being from a blue collar family, blah, blah, blah. So I was accidentally building my act, and those college gigs led to me doing a set on Conan, and that Conan set helped me get my development deal for my TV show. I always used to say, "I grew up in poverty. I grew up so poor that it made me so fearless, because at the end of the day I know what it's like to be poor. So if all of it goes away, I'm back to square one, which is actually where I grew up at, square one."

Menendez: We've talked a lot about the TV show. So if you're interested in that, check out our first episode with Cristela, but there is some stuff in Music To My Years that we haven't talked about. You and I have talked about it as friends and I loved this story. So why don't you tell me about going to buy your first car?

Alonzo: So the car that I had previously, it was that thing where you go to a car lot and they're like, "We checked your credit, and do you want this little car that you don't want? It drives though. It drives." So it was like that kind of thing. So I wanted a new car. I didn't know what to do. So Steve, Steve grew up in a middle class family. So very different world from me. So when I wanted a car, he was like, "I will help you get this car." My dream car, Alicia, was always a Honda Civic. That's all I wanted. A Honda Civic. And Steve knew that and I'm like-

Menendez: We can still make it happen for you, Cris.

Alonzo: I know. I'm like, "I want my Honda Civic."

Menendez: It's not too late.

Alonzo: No.

Menendez: But Steve and his cardigans are just much fancier than that.

Alonzo: Yes, Steve, I want my car and he's like, "I'm going to research and see what you want."

Menendez: And he comes back to you with a BMW, really? Like, I feel like we could've gotten a more mid-range car.

Alonzo: It was a Benz. So more affordable.

Menendez: That's right.

Alonzo: Yeah. No. So he's like, "I got the car for you. It's a Benz." And I was like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa." He's like, "Let's stop by the dealership. Let's just stop. Let's check

them out." And I'm like, "Oh, okay." And the dealership is in Beverly Hills. So we get there and nobody's ... Nobody comes up to us, nothing. And I saw this car and I was like, "I kind of want to test drive this car." Because I had already ... I had lowered the backseat down and I had gotten into it and even Steve was like, "What are you doing?" And I said, "Well, if things go bad and I lose everything, I want to be able to sleep in my car." I had a TV show on air at that point. I think I was already hosting The View at that point, but I wanted to make sure I could sleep in my car. And Steve and I went to the desk, the information desk, we got a salesperson to come out and the guy immediately was like, "We don't have them."

We were just looking at them, they were right there in front of our faces. I'm like, "Am I imagining this? Is this Wonder Woman's clear jet?" Like what is this? I can see that they right there and he was like, "Oh we don't have any to test drive." And Steve's like, "Okay, well, what do you have to test drive?" And the guy was just like, "Well, what do you want to buy?" You could tell he just didn't want anything to do with us. He was really kind of ... He was kind of a jerk. So he made me feel bad. So I just told Steve, "We should leave. We should leave."

Menendez: You walk out of the dealership, you are devastated, but he's angry.

Alonzo: Yeah, he wants to talk to the manager. You know what I mean? When I get into the car, I'm devastated to the point where I'm, I'm crying because it's that point where I'm like, "Oh my God, I have a TV show on the air. It's a network show. I'm on The View. What more do I need to do to have people allow me to spend money with them? What else do I have to do?" And Steve went back to the dealership. He ended up talking to the GM, I think it was, and he felt terrible. He sent the salesperson home for the day. The GM, I think his wife was Latina, so he was really embarrassed about everything, and he wanted to make it right. Steve called me, I was in the car bawling.

Steve's like, "Hey, I'm talking to So-and-so. He said, if you're interested in test driving a car, he will have a salesperson send it to the studio. You can test drive it around the studio." And I thought about it and I'm like ... I said yes, but I want the person to be of color, especially if they have a Latino, I want that person. And they sent this guy and he was great. After the test drive, I told Steve, "I want this car. I want it to be dropped off. I don't want to go to that car dealership ever again." And this Latina salesperson was the one to come to the studio to drop it off.

She gave me the keys, and I got my Benz. I got it, and I made sure that the person who got the commission on it was Latino, and it was such a good moment for me that I could help that guy get the commission. But at the same time, you know what? Still, at the same time, there's always that moment that part of me when I'm driving that car that I feel like I remember that somebody thought I wasn't worthy of that car and it makes me angry. It doesn't make me sad. It makes me angry.

Menendez: You are, in addition to the book, Music To My Years, you're also going on tour, My Affordable Care Act. How does this time feel different than every time you've done it before?

Alonzo: After the election, I didn't feel right doing stand up. I felt guilty trying to make money off of my community because so many people from the Latino community come and support me. And I grew up in San Juan, Texas, which is near McAllen, Texas. And right now that's where a lot of the family separations are happening. I didn't feel like I could make anybody

laugh, because I wasn't laughing myself. And I spent the next year and a half, two years or so, traveling the country and trying to meet with people from different cities and make sure that they were okay and help out with DACA renewal fees and trying to teach people their rights about ICE coming, and just everything that I felt like I could contribute. And it changed me as a person because I feel like I'm a lot more vulnerable now. I think it makes me feel like I have to be more honest with people. I'm being as honest as I can be. And I think that's the best way to try to empower people.

The TV shows I used to watch growing up didn't show me. The movies never did, the standup comics I grew up watching never did, the books I've read rarely do. And I just wanted to make sure that people knew that I existed, because I feel like a lot of people like me are forgotten. So the tour and the book, I want to entertain people, but I also want to let them know that after everything, I'm still here, so this fall, My Affordable Care Act: I called it that, because I talk about how I take care of myself and learning how to take care of myself by getting money.

You realize that to take care of yourself in the system that we live in, you have to have money, and how sometimes the money is used in certain ways, and how I struggle with it--because I come from this mentality of poverty, constant poverty, constant self doubt--and it's My Affordable Care Act. It's how I take care of myself. It's a marriage of this luxurious thing called health insurance mixed with this old world home remedy world. I hope to see people on the road. I'd like them to see where I'm at right now and remind them that I never went away. I just chose not to be seen for a while because I had to go live a life to have things to talk about.

Menendez: Cristela, I love you so much. Thank you for taking the time to do this.

Alonzo: Thank you for having me, honestly.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive-produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer, and Emma Forbes is the show's intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple podcasts, Google podcasts, or wherever you're listening, and please, leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

Menendez: Come on, say it back. Say it back. Come on Cris, tell me.

Alonzo: I love you. You know I love you. By God. Seriously. Thank you so much. This was awesome. I love you.

Menendez: All right, love you too. Go ahead.

Alonzo: No, no, no. That's it. I can call you and tell you everything else.

Menendez: You're like, "I have another thing."

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Cristela Alonzo's Drive to Make It Is Deeply Personal, Part 2." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., October 14, 2019. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by

