



Why Cristela Alonzo's Drive to Make It Is Deeply Personal, Part 1

As a latchkey kid growing up in San Juan, Texas, comedian Cristela Alonzo dreamed of leaving her border town and seeing the world. In this emotional two-part episode, she tells Alicia how her childhood aspirations made her the black sheep of her family, and how she needed to put those dreams on hold, first to care for her sister's children, and then, her ailing mother. Through it all, music and television – from the Backstreet Boys to the Golden Girls – was her "connection to the outside world." She writes about it all in her funny and moving new book, *Music to My Years: A Mixtape Memoir of Growing Up and Standing Up*.

Clip, Cristela Alonzo:

And I had always been this good kid, and I always did what my mom told me, but I knew that I wasn't going to stay. So the final moment when she realized that I was going to leave, she gets down on her knees. She begs me not to go. She's crying, "Don't go, don't go. Like you're breaking my heart." I remember telling her like this thing is bigger than me. It's bigger than all of this. It's just bigger.

Alicia Menendez:

Her Netflix comedy special, *Lower Classy*, made us laugh mostly at ourselves. And now, Cristela Alonzo is giving us an intimate look into her life with her memoir, *Music to My Years*. We talked about so much. The conversation takes up two episodes. In this first part, Cristela tells me about the loneliness of her childhood and the heartbreak of caring for her mother.

In next week's episode, we'll talk about the come up and finding herself through comedy. I will admit even though we are friends, there was still so much to learn about this funny woman I know and love.

Cristela, congratulations on becoming the first Latina to Latina guest to earn a second episode.

Alonzo: Oh, is that right? Oh, man.

Menendez: Yes, added to your list of accolades.

Alonzo: You know what? I am tired of cleaning up the shards of glass from all the ceilings I keep breaking. Oh, my god.

Menendez: Oh, hashtag blessed, hashtag blessed. Okay. But seriously, I loved the book. I loved it. I loved it. You know how much I loved it because I was annoyingly texting you throughout my first reading of it, and I love the way you structure it. Each chapter is about a song that captures a time in your life, not to pigeonhole you, but I imagined we'd open like with Selena and instead you give us Boston's More Than a Feeling as your opening chapter. What does that song mean to you?

Alonzo: Boston's More Than a Feeling was really the first song in my life that I made a conscious effort to remember the moment I heard it because it was so overwhelming to me. I'm sitting in a car, windows rolled down. I looked up at the sky and I used to do that twinkle, twinkle little star every night. The moment the sun would set, I would run outside, pick a star, and just make a wish. And the wish was usually leaving my hometown to see what was out there because it just seemed so ... My town seemed big and I thought, what about the world? How big is the world if my little hometown seems humongous?

I could never explain to my family, especially my mother, what I wanted to do. I just used to tell her all the time, "Hey, trust me, if this pays off, it's going to be great for everybody," and she never got it. It was so foreign to her, but to me, that moment when I heard that song looking up at the stars, everything was aligned perfectly.

And I used that moment as kind of the event that pushed me forward in a lot of things because it was so unknown to me as well that I just decided, you know what, this feeling I'm going to try the rest of my life to try to get this feeling in my life whenever I can.

Menendez: You've spoken a lot about how you grew up. One of four kids squatting in a diner, sharing a twin bed with your mom and you talk about it so freely, so generously with little shame both in the context of us being friends, but also like I've heard you in interviews talk about this. But you never really talk about it the way that you write about it in the book. So 1980s, San Juan, Texas, what was just like your average day like?

Alonzo: My average day, we were allowed to sleep until 9:00 in the morning. If we woke up after 9:00 my mom was livid because she thought that we were wasting time in our day. We had to be productive. I had to clean the house every morning at 9:00 in the morning. First of all, we wouldn't eat breakfast because we didn't have enough food.

So breakfast was this thing that, this concept that I grew up thinking, "Oh, school has breakfast. But at home we don't eat breakfast." So I would wake up at 9:00. I would have coffee as a kid. It's just like I'm going into the office job. Like "Yo, Natalia, pour me a cup of Joe. I gotta clock in, clean this house."

It's funny because even when we were squatting in the diner, we cleaned that diner every day. And after that, we would usually just sit. My mom and I, we would sit or lie down in our little twin bed and we would talk for a couple hours before she had to go into work. My mom would come home at 8:30. So I really spent most of the day by myself. And honestly, being by myself was probably the best thing that could have happened to me because in a weird way I had no restrictions.

: Nobody was telling me that what I was getting into in regards to like theater and the creative arts and everything. Nobody was there to make fun of me. Nobody was there to question it. Nobody was there to judge it. And it was just this moment in my life where I

allowed it. It was just such a pure love and appreciation for it that I think that's why I like spending my adult life so lonely in a way.

So by myself. I mean, I'm like a hermit. I'm a homebody because I grew up that way and I like solitude. It makes me think.

Menendez: But you did have friends on television. Picture it, San Juan, Texas, 1987, an eight-year old girl lives with her family in a border town when suddenly out of nowhere she meets four older women. They live in Miami, yet somehow the five of them become best friends.

(Music)

What was it about The Golden Girls that you loved? It was one of my favorite shows. Our mutual friend, Jose Antonio Vargas, talks about the fact that it's part of how he learned English. I mean there's something for our generation about that show.

Alonzo: It's so rare to have a show about friendship that really shows friendship. Usually, during the '80s, a lot of the shows I watched were always family sitcoms. They were stories about a family. And I talked about it in the book. It's these situations that were so unfamiliar to me. It's like, "Oh, my god, we have two birthday cakes. What are we going to do?" And I'm like, "What's a birthday cake? Like what is a birthday cake? I don't even understand this."

But also, it wasn't until I was an adult that I realized that that connection between Dorothy Zbornak and Sophia Petrillo really reminded me of my mom and I. It's an interesting connection because we do not address the fact that Sophia Petrillo is an immigrant in the show. She talks about it constantly, but because she's Italian, we just consider her an immigrant in the United States. But we really think of her as American.

And I always found that interesting because my mom was from Mexico and for me, I never looked at her and thought, "Wow, look at this Mexican woman from Mexico that I have as a mother." We're so good as a culture, as a society to make immigrants feel like they're not part of us. That show shows you that an immigrant was just like a regular person because they didn't think about it. They didn't think about having an episode where Sophia might get deported. It's just Sophia. They did an episode where Sophia bought a peach. Like that was the episode. We were just allowed to see a mother and daughter exist.

And with me, I saw that relationship with my mom and it just seemed so familiar and it seemed so comforting because it made me feel like I belonged here. And even though I was born in Texas, my entire life has been made to make me feel like I don't belong here. And that is something that I've always sought this idea, this comfort, this validation, that it's okay for me to exist here.

Menendez: In writing *Music to My Years*, did you realize how quintessentially '80s and middle-class and white your musical and TV tastes were?

Alonzo: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Well, think about it. That's all we had available. That's why for me, the black culture, I embraced with all my heart when I discovered it because I grew up in an area where we didn't have a lot of diversity. We were predominantly Latino, everybody. We didn't have a lot of ... I didn't grow up with a lot of white people or black people. We were all Latino, with no like Asian.

So when I was growing up, I always did see the quintessential middle-class family, and I was taught that that's what you were supposed to reach for, strive for because it was the only depiction I had. I thought that that family, being at that level was when you realize that you belonged. But let me tell you, when I started discovering like black culture, whatever was available to me in my neighborhood, man, I fell in love with it because that was the first time, especially with rap music, which I talked about in the book. It's like with rap music, they were talking about like where they came from, their neighborhoods and it was different.

My experience was different from them. But you know what I loved is that they actually talked about having difficulties and how they struggled. And for me, I was like, "Man, like that's the closest thing that I can associate with." We were force-fed this idea that people like me were also told at the same we could never have.

Now, my whole childhood, my upbringing was about seeing these movies and seeing these TV shows where people got to live a life that to me was like science fiction. Yet we were told. I was told through these stories that that's what the American dream was. So if we didn't attain that American dream, were we a failure as Americans? Was I a failure as a person?

I realized, man, I felt growing up that I was less than a person because I didn't live in a two-story house. I didn't have the two-parent household where for some reason everybody wears cardigans inside the house, like they would eat dinner. My family ate dinner around the table at the same time we ate as a family. But they dressed up. They would eat dinner in outfits that we would go to church in, and it was just this thing where it's like, "Well, we're just home being regular people."

And I'm like, "My god. Like do you understand how fancy you are?" I'm watching these TV shows and my mom's like, "Man, we've got to make these hundred dollars in food stamps last a whole month," and it's like, "Oh yeah, I'm just like them."

Menendez: I want to fast forward to college. You spend a year at college and then I think it's after the summer after your freshman year. Your mom tells you, you have to drop out of school because your sister needed help with her kids. I'd have to ask, was there any part of you, any part that entertained the possibility of just saying no?

Alonzo: No, absolutely not. I mentioned in the book when I decided to go to college for theater, my mom forbid me to go. She wanted me near her. There was a moment when she didn't think I was going to leave her to go to college. My mom couldn't understand like she didn't want-

Menendez: It is a brutal section of the book.

Alonzo: It is.

Menendez: It is so painful.

Alonzo: It's this thing where my mom-

Menendez: And I'm sure it's more painful to live and to write, but ooh!

Alonzo: Yeah. It's this thing where she left her abusive husband. She was the first woman in her family to leave a bad marriage and she was super Catholic, but she wanted to protect her kids. And she left without anywhere to go, which is why we ended up squatting in this diner because that was the only place she could find. For her, I imagined that having done so much for her kids, she always wanted them close to her.

My sister at that time lived in Dallas, so did my brother, but they were still in Texas. The fact that I wanted to go outside of Texas meant that she was going to lose me forever. And she kept telling me I wasn't going, I wasn't going. And I had always been this good kid and I always did what my mom told me, but I knew that I wasn't going to stay. The final moment when she realized that I was going to leave, she gets down on her knees and she begs me not to go. She's crying and she's just begging me like, "Don't go, don't go. Like you're breaking my heart."

And it was like Boston's More Than a Feeling. I remember telling her like this thing is bigger than me. It's bigger than all of this. It's just bigger. And I left and she stopped talking to me for a while. It was kind of like, I felt like I was disowned. And when she asked me to drop out of college, I had a fear that if I said no, I would lose my family because I had already somewhat lost my mother for a bit because of my choice to go get a higher education. There's just no way I could say no.

And I don't understand how people, like in TV shows and movies, they actually do say no. And they're like, "I'm going to go live my own life. I'm my own person and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah." But for me, I couldn't do it. I mean, I have been conditioned since I was a child to make sure that my family was always taken care of. That's kind of like the old-fashioned matriarch position where, my mom grew up in an old world.

Menendez: Yes, it's the old-fashioned matriarch position, but put on the baby of the family, which is what makes it so interesting, right? It was put on you even though you were the youngest.

Alonzo: Absolutely. And that's a thing that I never understood. I always thought that it was the oldest that could do it, but also I was the one that didn't really have direction in their life even though I did. I was the one that knew what they wanted to do their entire life. I knew what I wanted to do since I could remember, since I was six, seven something. I didn't know exactly what it was, but I knew I wanted to do that.

But because it was so foreign, my mom was a cook at a Mexican restaurant. My brother Eloy worked in construction. My brother Ruben worked at this gas station, late night shifts where they had like a drive-through. You know what I mean? It's like my family comes from a blue collar world where all of the jobs have to hurt.

For me, my job was so ridiculous because I was thinking. Part of the job is to think. Part of my dream was to perform and it just seems so luxurious and excessive and just indulgent that my mom always thought that I was the one that could stop their life because I really had no life, no direction. I didn't strive for anything. I was the black sheep of my family.

Menendez: It's not the last time that you're asked to put your dreams on hold to be a caretaker. I mean, you're living in LA. Things are not going well for you. There's car tickets that basically put you over the edge. It seems like things can't get worse than they do. Your mom's sick, you fly home. She has this miraculous recovery, which is spoiler alert, just a

real surprise in the book. And then she basically says, "I survived because you are here with me. So now you have to stay." And so again, ever the dutiful daughter you stay.

And I can't tell you how beautifully you write about your mom being sick, about moving into your sister's sleeping next to her and just the sound she'd make at night, how the two of you would go to Walmart so that you could distract her in the middle of the night. And during that period though, the song you listened to really caught me by surprise. It's Backstreet Boys' Shape of My Heart, which doesn't feel like the soundtrack for what I just articulated. So what did that song then represent to you?

Alonzo: That was one of the songs where I'm like, ah! People are going to have to trust me on this one.

Menendez: And I do actually think it is one of the best examples in there.

Alonzo: We'll, see, and here's the thing is that when my mom recovered, she was on her deathbed. If people have never seen anybody that they love on their death bed, devastating doesn't say enough, especially if it's a parent because they've always been the strong ones. And now you see them at their weakest, and it's kind of like you find out that the superhero has lost all their powers.

I found myself living with my mom in the little house that we moved in after we squatted at this diner. I was in my 20s. And I had nothing except the little bag that I had brought with me and it just had a couple outfits. I had no job, I had no money, I had nothing and I felt like I was back at square one as a little kid in poverty. And for a second, I thought that was my lot in life.

And my mom had really bad anxiety. She would get panic attacks because of what she had. And she had a lot of things but at this point, we had figured out that the doctors told us that she had suffered numerous strokes throughout her life that left her heart weaker every time. We didn't know she had strokes because we couldn't afford to go to the doctor. So her heart was really weak, and she would have these panic attacks.

And because I was her caretaker, I was right next to her and I would hear her have these panic attacks at night. And it was just painful to hear because you knew you couldn't do anything. And she was just sitting up. She was awake, she would walk around the little house and I had this idea that I wanted her to get out and, I don't know, use the energy for something, which is why I came up with the Walmart trips. I picked Walmart because it was open 24 hours a day.

And on one of those trips, the Backstreet Boys CD, they were setting it up, the display and everything because it was on sale. I stopped and it reminded me of my life in Los Angeles. That CD, the Backstreet Boys CD actually reminded me of the life that I wish I could have had at that moment, which is what a lot of women my age at that point were living. They were dating, and they were out like socializing with friends and everything, and they had this freedom.

: And I remember, and I didn't write this in the book, but I wanted that CD so bad because I wanted that connection to my life, but I had no money. So here I am in my 20s, and I have to ask my mom to buy me that CD. I felt so ashamed, like so embarrassed that my mom was fighting for her life. And here I am asking her for \$9 or so, so that I can buy that CD.

But she bought it for me and I listened to it. And every time I would listen to it, I would just hear that song, Shape of My Heart. And I don't know why, I just loved the song and I would hear it and just imagine the life that I could have if I was a "normal" girl my age.

I would listen to it and I would hear my mom wailing in pain in the background. It also showed how I tried to survive for myself and how I tried to have anything, any connection to the outside world.

(Music)

Menendez: You can buy Cristela's new memoir, *Music to My Years*, anywhere you buy books. Next week in part two, Cristela talks about falling in love with comedy, finding success, and of course, her Selena moment.

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. Emma Forbes is our Assistant Producer.

We love hearing from you, so email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. And remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Pandora, Spotify, or wherever you're listening. And please leave a review; it's one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Why Cristela Alonzo's Drive to Make It Is Deeply Personal, Part 1." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., October 7, 2019. LatinaToLatina.com

Produced by

