



## How Documentarian Cristina Costantini Fed Her Soul While Making “Mucho, Mucho Amor”

For years Cristina covered detention centers and drug cartels as an investigative journalist. Without any film school training, she decided to take on visual stories about small worlds that tell us so much about human nature. Her latest, "Mucho, Mucho Amor," centers on the private life of renowned astrologer Walter Mercado—her childhood hero and a controversial iconoclast that changed primetime television forever.

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Alicia Menendez:

Confession time. I love Cristina Costantini. Our professional paths have overlapped twice. First, at the Huffington Post, then at Fusion TV, where I watched as Cristina soared from investigative journalist to documentary filmmaker. Her first film, *Science Fair*, won awards at Sundance and South by Southwest, and led to her new Netflix doc, *Mucho Mucho Amor*, about the private life of Walter Mercado. Today, we talk about how she and her co-director convinced the famed television astrologer to give them unprecedented access during what would become his final days, and we nerd out, as we often do, about what makes a subject worthy of a documentary, as I get the story of how Cristina learned to direct without ever going to film school.

What was it that pulled you to documentary?

Cristina Costantini:

Yeah, I spent eight years basically of my life nonstop on the phone with detainees, and talking to drug cartel leaders, and I was doing very difficult stories, and they really were taking a toll, and I think the world is a dark place, and is in strife, and whenever I need a break from that or need a little bit of hope, I would watch these documentaries like *Spellbound*, or *Mad Hot Ballroom*, which are documentaries about kids who are doing amazing things. And I started thinking back to my own experience as a kid in the International High School Science fair, and I just remembered the joy, what a unique environment it is, it's majority female, majority non-white, then you have kids doing some of the most brilliant, amazing research, and they're also hilarious, because they're like... They're real go getters, and they haven't learned how to edit themselves yet, and so I wanted to document those kids and tell a happy story about how the future is bright.

Menendez:

If I had told you when you were doing those science fairs that you would grow up to become a documentarian, what would you have said?

Costantini:

I think I would have been thrilled. I've loved documentaries since I was a kid. I just didn't see that as a viable career path, though. I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. My parents are furniture makers. I didn't see that as a viable career path for me, and yeah, I would have been thrilled.

Menendez: How did your Argentine dad end up in Wisconsin?

Costantini: They moved to New York first, and it was too big, and too bustling, so then they ended up going to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where they had a German friend. There are lots of Germans in Argentina. He was an Argentine German person who liked Milwaukee, because there were also lots of Germans.

Menendez: The film, your first film, Science Fair, at Sundance wins a big award, the audience loves it. What did you learn from that first foray into directing?

Costantini: It's a lot more fun than investigative journalism I would say. No, but I think I learned kind of the power of a hopeful story. I think hope and love are in short supply right now, and these kinds of stories can really change the way people think of the world and think of themselves. And so, Walter came out of that, in a way. I was looking for another story that was also from my childhood. I started thinking, "What other worlds do I know really well, that nobody everybody knows?" And what other worlds made me feel warm and fuzzy as a kid? And I think Walter Mercado was part of that world for me. I grew up watching him every day as a kid with my grandmother, and he reminds me of my grandmother in many ways. He's the same age as my grandmother. They have the same hairdo. And so, I started to wonder what ever happened to him, and in many ways, he was as he would say a hundred years ahead of his time. The first person I'd ever seen that was gender queer, what we'd call now.

It's just inspirational. Looking back, it's like, "Good God, you were doing that at that time. In 1940 in Puerto Rico you were being Walter Mercado." It's really inspirational. So, that's when I set out to find him.

Menendez: You set out to find him. What does that mean?

Costantini: So, I started asking around Univision and Fusion, and Nando actually told me, Nando Vila, told me that there's a producer named Alex Fumero who's also obsessed with Walter, who you should talk to about this. Maybe he knows something. So, I called Alex and he was like, "This is the weirdest thing. I have another director who I'm supposed to talk to in 10 minutes about doing a documentary about Walter Mercado." And I was like, "Who is this person?" And his name is Kareem Tabsch, and he directed a film called Dolphin Lover, which I was a big fan of. It's about a man who falls in love with a dolphin in a Florida Sea World. And I had loved that film. And I was like, "Oh, amazing. I mean, I would love to talk to him." And we decided basically 10 minutes later on a phone call that we would all do the project together.

And yeah, it's been an incredible experience. Kareem tracked down the niece of Walter through an estate sale, and then set up a phone call with Walter, and it was... Yeah, it was off to the races. It was really insane to talk to Walter Mercado on the phone for the first time. And he said yes.

Menendez: Well, that unprecedented access is notable because he is and has always been intensely private, so how did you three persuade him to allow you to make the film?

Costantini: We had rehearsed for that first conversation for hours and hours. What are the possible questions he could ask us? How would we answer it? What's the best angle on all of his questions? And we got on the phone and he said, "Okay, I have one question for you." And we were like, "This is it. It's gonna be really hard." And he was like, "What are your astrological signs?" And so, we went around, and I was like, "I'm a Libra." Kareem's a Libra. And Alex is Sagittarius, and he said, "Okay, that's great. Sounds good. I would love to do this film with you." So, he was in. Like in, in. From day one. He was psyched. But his idea of a documentary, we realized very quickly, was very different from our idea. He wanted... He was in front of a lens for 50 years. He was the most camera trained person you can imagine. It's truly insane, and he has 50 years of rehearsed answers. He knows what he's going to say to every question you could ask him.

And so, it was really a process of spending a lot of time with him. At first, he thought this was going to just... He was going to be in full makeup and just telling the stories he always tells, and I think it took a lot of time to explain to him that this might be different, that this is... We want to see who you actually are without your makeup, what you do in your normal life, and talking about bad stuff was particularly offensive to him. He did not want to talk about anything bad. And that is the story of his life. A lot goes wrong. He loses everything. And even to get him to talk about that was very difficult, so that was a big stumbling block for us in the first 20 interviews that we did with him.

So, we've probably shot with him for like 35 or 40 days, and whenever the camera was on, it kind of turned into an interview. I remember we told him once that we just wanted to... What would he be doing if we weren't here, and he said reading a book, and so he opened a book and he started reading it, but it was like on stage. He's a trained theater actor, so it was like stage reading, where he was like having a conversation with the book that he was reading with his eyes.

Menendez: Well, even the one time you get him eating breakfast, it was the most stately breakfast.

Costantini: I know. Oh my gosh. He's just a very stately man.

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Menendez: There's so many big names in this doc. Lin-Manuel Miranda, Nydia Caro, but the biggest get in terms of telling the story might be Bill Bakula, Walter's former manager as you said, Latina to Latina: How Documentarian Cristina Costantini Fed Her Soul While Making "Mucho, Mucho Amor."

who without giving too much away, deeply tied to Walter's disappearance from the limelight. How did you convince Bill to participate?

Costantini: That is all Alex Fumero. He's an incredible producer. And I think the key was just being honest with Bill and telling him that we were going to tell the story. He was going to be in it. He's a large part of the reason that Walter was so successful. We wouldn't know, we wouldn't be talking about Walter, we wouldn't know who Walter is if it were not for Bill's hard work and production genius, really. He made Walter a star. But we also would probably had Walter for much longer if it were not for Bill, so Alex was very honest with him about that, that that was what our movie was going to entail, and he could either talk about it or he could not talk about it. To his credit, he answered every question, and really spoke to the issues at hand. It was a really interesting interview. It was a bit tense, but also like he was one of the only people who was there for most of the stuff that we're talking about, so we also wanted him to tell the story of Walter's life.

Menendez: How long does a documentary like this take to produce from beginning to end?

Costantini: This actually is an incredibly quick turn for a documentary film. We started filming in January of 2018 and we really had to race to finish it, because we were aware that Walter's health was failing him. And so, we really wanted to finish the film so that Walter could be there when it premiered, so January of 2018 was our first shoot. We sent it to Sundance November 1<sup>st</sup> of 2019, and then Walter passed away November 2<sup>nd</sup> of 2019, so it was-

Menendez: So, did he get to see it?

Costantini: He didn't see the full cut. We were with him five weeks before he passed away, and we showed him about 20 minutes, and he loved those, and it was all about his childhood, and his days as a dancer, and an actor, and the first time he was on television, and his kind of rise to superstardom. That's what he saw.

Menendez: There are a few devices you use in the film that I want to ask you about. Very early on, there are reenactments, so I would first of all love to know how you know exactly what my grandmother's living room looked like?

Costantini: That's so nice of you to say that. Yeah. All we cared about was that Latinos could recognize their living rooms of their grandmothers, or their kitchens, so that was all shot over one day, in one house, in a Latino neighborhood here, but we set designed every single room to look like it was a different kind of Latino grandmother's house.

Menendez: So, there's both the sort of abuelas piece of this, and then there is the millennial piece of this. All of the Twitter and Instagram snapshots. Why did that feel important?

Costantini: Yeah. You know, I think for so many of us, Walter is kind of like a Mr. Rogers kind of character, where we equate him with our childhood, and he gives us this warm, fuzzy feeling that's kind of hard to explain. And he was for us like a Big Bird or an Oprah, like he was a character that fascinated us. So, we really wanted to pay homage to that kind of-

Menendez: He fascinated us and the way that my grandmother was when he would come on the TV fascinated me.

Costantini: Yes. Exactly. The amount of trust that was placed in this person was huge, and he would... Lin-Manuel tells the story of all of us, basically-

Menendez: Yes.

Costantini: ... when he says that when Walter would come on, it was like, “Shh! Everybody be quiet. Walter’s going to read our horoscopes.” So, he had a hold on a whole community during... For 30 years he was on TV, which is remarkable.

Menendez: I’ve now read a lot about the film. Largely positive reviews. I haven’t read a single negative review. All positive reviews. But the one critique seems to be that you didn’t go hard enough on the fact that he was doing these astrology hotlines.

Costantini: Yes.

Menendez: And that they were in some ways incredibly predatory.

Costantini: Yeah.

Menendez: So, can you talk to me a little bit about how you, as directors, chose to probe that question and to tease it out?

Costantini: Yeah. You know, we talked about it for a long time. I think we did a lot of interviews. We did interviews with people who were psychic debunkers. We did interviews, we tried to find people who had been victims of these hotlines, and we did a lot of interviews with that as a possible beat that we would go into. Documentary filmmaking is kind of like fishing. You go get a lot of stuff and then you decide what makes it. We did push Walter on it a bit, and you hear Kareem, my co-director, ask him, “Well, weren’t these predatory? Weren’t you taking advantage of poor people?” And you can see that it makes Walter uncomfortable in the moment, which I think was our duty to kind of go into it, but at the end of the day, it was something that he did, largely because Bill set it up, and something that I think deep down he felt conflicted about, and I’m not sure that he wanted to be doing that. He never said that on camera, but yeah, it was a big question for us.

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Menendez: Can you pull back the curtain for me? When you say a lot of producing a documentary is you go fishing, you bring back a ton, and then you decide what makes it, what does that actually look like in practice?

Costantini: Yeah, so hundreds, and like you said, hundreds and hundreds of hours of footage. But it's a fun process. It's also a very hard process. I love being in the field. I love the fishing trip. I love figuring out what the story might be in real time. The editing part is a lot more heartbreaking, because you have to lose things that you love. One of my biggest regrets is this moment where Walter's baby birding his little dog, Runo, he's pre-chewing the food and feeding his little dog, Runo. And it is the strangest. To me, it's like my sense of humor, it is the strangest, funniest thing, really gross, but there was no place in the film for it, so there's no baby birding Runo.

Menendez: You didn't go to film school. How did you learn to direct?

Costantini: I mean, really Fusion was an amazing training ground. I feel like I got so lucky, I went to journalism school for free and film school. Darren Foster and Mariana van Zeller, a couple who you know, who are incredible documentary filmmakers, and Mariana's a correspondent in LA. I've spent so much time with both of them and I have learned so much from both of them. I surrounded myself and tried to follow people who I really respected and thought were very good. I also love going out and asking people if I can get them lunch, or dinner, and then asking them all of the questions I have. I really feel like I'll always be learning and just asking questions and being annoying and staying there long enough is half the battle. Being in the mix, being in the thick of it.

Menendez: So, let's talk about the pitching.

Costantini: Yeah.

Menendez: As you were going around, first of all, who were you pitching this film to and what was the response in the rooms that you were in?

Costantini: You know, when I first pitched this film, I had just made Science Fair, and I was like, "Finally, I got something done. I got my first feature done, and it did very well, and now I'm gonna be able to make whatever I want." And I remember there was an agent who wanted to represent me, and they were like, "So, what's next with you?" And I said, "I want to make this movie about this gender queer Puerto Rican astrologer who's very important to all Latinos." And the first thing they said to me was, "Well, you know, crossover stuff doesn't really work for us. We tried one and it didn't work." And so, I immediately was so mad, and people who know me know that that's the best thing you can say to me, is that I can't do something. I'm like, "Okay. All right. That is the motivation I needed for the next two years to make this happen." And I feel like a lot of Latino producers and directors have stories that are similar to this.

Initially, it was very hard. Pitching this story around, people didn't get it, and I would be like, "Have you seen Walter? How can you not understand this man? He has such a huge following of people who don't know he's still alive. How can you not understand this?" So, it was very frustrating for about a year, until we started encountering Latino executives. Well, actually just one maybe Latino executive who got it immediately, and I think that was a large part of why the movie happened. And really, I think Walter's story is being

memorialized by people in our generation, who are insistent that his story be told, and that his story mattered, and that we need everybody to know that Walter is an American icon.

Menendez: So, when you were doing that initial pitching, are you pitching it to places that may want to buy it for distribution?

Costantini: Well, first you're pitching it... Usually with documentary, you pitch it to funders, like production companies, or grants, you're writing grant applications, or you could... Now, the docs landscape is so diverse that you could be pitching it to the Apples, or the Netfixes, or you can pitch it directly to the buyers. But it turned out really well for us. We had a little bit of financing from Topic Studios, and we were able to sell it to Netflix right after we got into Sundance, so it was amazing. It was amazing.

Menendez: Forgive this question if it is tacky, but I ask it because this is I think some of the stuff, the opaqueness of these industries, that stops people from getting into them, which is, so, from sort of the last check you get for the last documentary you made until you get a real distribution deal, how are you paying your bills in between?

Costantini: That's a great question. It's really you piece it together. I did some branded documentary work. I did little projects here and there. Just to make ends meet. I was still being paid from Science Fair for a while, but it's really a struggle. It's really you have to... It's a juggling act, and you have to be developing more than one product at once. I think we always have 12 irons in the fire at once, and hope that one pops off. So, it's a real juggling act, but it's so much fun. I would encourage anybody who's interested in documentary film to try it, because I love it.

Menendez: I hope this is not annoying. I have often said that would be a great documentary, or someone should do a documentary on that. What are the questions you need to ask yourself to determine if a subject has enough there there to warrant a documentary?

Costantini: Yeah. I mean, I always ask myself what are the stories that I can uniquely tell, that other people maybe don't have an entry point into? And I think Walter and Science Fair were both those kinds of stories. I think we also have a duty to tell stories that move things forward, or make people think about these larger issues, whether they be immigration, or LGBT rights, any issue that deserves space. I also always look for an arc in a story. Where are we going to? Where are we headed? What are the stakes for the characters and how is this going to resolve itself? So, that's a story structure kind of framework that I look for.

Menendez: I know that moment where you see a trailer for a film and all of a sudden all of the festival awards start popping up. But as someone who's never been to a film festival, or has never participated in a film festival, what is the importance of those festivals and what is the significance of them when you're trying to bring a film to market?

Costantini: I had never been to a film festival before Science Fair premiered at Sundance.

Menendez: Thank you for making me feel less uncool. Thank you.

Costantini: I had never been. I didn't really understand what they were. Yeah. I had never been to one. I didn't quite understand the culture. But for filmmakers, a film festival is where you can be acquired. It's where buzz started. It's a marketplace. Science Fair was acquired by National Geographic after we won. We won an audience award at Sundance, and then South by, and we kept picking up audience awards. That really gave us what we needed

to get acquired, I think. And then Science Fair, after it was acquired, had a long, happy life in theaters, and it was in schools, and none of that would have been possible without the film festivals.

Menendez: We're in a moment where every industry is being asked to do a self-assessment of whether or not they truly are diverse, whether or not they are truly inclusive as it relates largely to communities of color, specifically as it relates to the Black community. And so, I wonder from your perch where you think there is room to improve and grow within film generally, but also within documentary?

Costantini: Yeah. You know, I think as I just said about Walter's story, it wasn't until we had a champion who was Latino that the story was kind of recognized as important, and I think for as progressive as people want to be, there's no equivalent to just having a person of color in the room. I really think we have to get serious about hiring people from different communities, because they have different entry points, and they understand things in a different light, and-

Menendez: You're saying even more specifically the people who have the access to the funding.

Costantini: Yes. The people in power need to be hiring Brown people, people of color. The stories will get better and they'll get more interesting. If you've only been telling the story of human history through white male voices for so long, once you open that up, the stories are gonna get way better and way more interesting. And they are, and it's a really exciting time. It's a really, really exciting time to be a filmmaker, because I think that acknowledgment is happening right now. I think if you're Latina in particular, and thinking about getting into documentary film, we need you. There are only a few of us.

Menendez: I was reading. Oh my God, you would die. I was reading an interview you did in 2013, when you just left the Huffington Post and started your job at Fusion.

Costantini: Oh my gosh.

Menendez: It was so sweet. The reporter asked you about the secret to your success.

Costantini: I was like 12.

Menendez: And you sort of knew that. You were like, "Well, the secret to my success, as you suggest." And you said, "I dream really big, to the point that some people would probably say it's delusional."

Costantini: Yes.

Menendez: Is that as true today as it was then?

Costantini: Absolutely. I always try to channel my small Argentinian father. I think everybody should have a delusional Argentinian man on their shoulder at all times, because he dreams so big and does such crazy things, and I'm always like, "What would Mario do?" And I think if especially women could channel that small delusional Argentinian man, we would all be a lot farther. So, yeah. Dream big. That's my advice.

Menendez: Cristina, thank you so much.

Costantini: Oh, thank you! Thanks! So nice to be here.



Menendez: Mucho Mucho Amor.

Costantini: Oh my God. Mucho Mucho Amor.

Menendez: Thanks as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com), and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you are listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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