



Adrienne Bailon-Houghton Wouldn't Change the Journey

Faith, family and hard work powered this megastar from her church choir to pop stardom to the set of *The Real*. But along that way, her faith was tested. Adrienne opens up about the growing pains of fame, the fertility journey that brought her to surrogacy, and her commitment to showing up authentically so that others can do the same.

Alicia Menendez: From the moment we sat down for this interview, it was clear to me that whatever it is that makes someone a star, Adrienne Bailon-Houghton has it. Her natural charisma, her work hard attitude, it has all powered her from girl group to Disney Star to award-winning host, including her new gig on the reality show, *Love For The Ages*. Adrienne opens up about the early days of fame, how *The Real* forced her to interrogate her own boundaries and what her fertility journey and the stigma around surrogacy has taught her about how to show up for others.

Thank you so much for doing this.

Adrienne Bailon...: Thank you. I'm excited.

Menendez: I know you've told this story before, but I want to hear it from you, which is how does a girl from the Lower East Side go from singing in the church choir to becoming a huge pop star? Start at the beginning.

Bailon-Houghton: Honestly, the story shocks me every time I say it because I'm just like, "How did this happen? How does this happen?" It's absolutely insane. So I grew up singing in church. My dad actually came to this country to sing at a nightclub in Queens. He was a salsa and a cumbia singer, and he got his work visa at 36 years old, and that's where he met my mom, who's Puerto Rican. And growing up, he really implemented singing and performing in our household. So we started singing in church and I was pretty much in every play for Easter, for pastor appreciation. I sang nonstop and I loved it. So I went to a junior high school that prepares you to put your portfolio together to audition for schools like LaGuardia and Julliard. And then I realized that that costs money. So in my senior year of junior high school, I was like, "Man, my mom, I see her struggle. She hasn't bought herself a new pair of panties in years." We struggle here.

Menendez: Who has? I mean, if you're not in panties from five years ago, 10 years ago, what are you even doing?

Bailon-Houghton: Listen, you are thriving and you're living a different life that we don't recognize. So you had to have a headshot. If you were auditioning for vocal, you had to cut a demo. And if you were auditioning for acting, then you had to have a video of a scene that you did. But I'm like, "I've never done anything professional. I don't even know how people get into the TV box. How does this work?" I can't go home and tell my mom, "I need 200 something dollars to do a photo shoot." It's just not going to happen. And my sister had just gone into high school. She's three years older than me at another specialized high

school called Health Professions and Human Services. So I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to go to the same school that my sister went in."

So I end up going to the Health Profession School and in your sophomore year, they make you do an internship at Beth Israel, which is right across the street. So this is how I feel like God really makes things work. This is where destiny plays its role. So I went to the health school. I'm standing and I'm filing paperwork at Beth Israel and a guy named Reggie walks in, who crazy enough, might be an angel of some sort because I have only seen him at this time and I've never saw him again in my life. I just remember his name is Reggie, I don't know his last name. And he walked in, he had a crutch and he's like, "Yo, ma, you sing?" And I remember being, "As a matter of fact, I do it. Would you like to hear?" And he was like, "I know this manager that's putting together a girl group in New Jersey, funny enough in Newark." And pretty much I auditioned from that moment for the group 3LW. Four months later, Tommy Mottola signed us to our record deal at Epic, and we put out an album the following year.

Menendez: There's a conversation you had with your sister, I thought was super interesting about what it is like to go from being a kid who didn't grow up with money to suddenly having money and it happening very quickly. And as she remembers it, you wanted everyone to have a piece of that. You wanted to share what it was, and there was actual concern on the part of your family that you were so generous. That you were so willing to give it away. And I wonder just how you didn't lose yourself in that period, given how young you were, given how high the stakes were, given the amount of money that was on the table. Were there people around you who were holding you up? Was it an internal sense of self? What were you doing to not lose yourself in that period?

Bailon-Houghton: I think the key really is that I had such an incredible family that I came from that never made me feel like my value came from what I did or the money that I made. So it meant nothing to me to give it away because I knew it wasn't where my value came from. And having that foundation and that stability of love, and that that was the currency that meant the most to me, was the love that I had from my family and the support. I think it makes a huge difference when you are the breadwinner for your family and you are supporting them.

Although I was the one making the most money, I still had a mom that just retired last year. Who got up every single day, my whole life, I watched a woman who could've said, "My daughter's rich. She could take care of us," and instead I would want to buy things for my mom and do things for her. And she was like, "No, that's not for you to feel. That's not the kind of pressure I want you to feel, and it's actually my job to take care of you."

Menendez: I'm going to confess something, which is, I remember when they were casting for The Real and I met with Tomii Crump who you were probably meeting with at the same time too. And Tomii and I knew within three minutes that it was not me. But you know how it is when you've done any of these casting meetings, you then follow a project to be like, "Okay. Well, they didn't choose me, so who do they choose?" And I remember when I saw you, I was like, "This is perfect. This is wonderful. I love this, and she's going to represent us so well."

Bailon-Houghton: Thank you.

Menendez: I think those shows are hard. And I think they are harder than people realize that they are. One, having an opinion about something every day, not actually easy. There are things I'm like, "I just don't have an opinion about." Two, choosing how much of yourself you share.

Choosing how much of your life you are willing to make public. Did you make those choices upfront or were you feeling through it as you went?

Bailon-Houghton: Yes and no. Yes, there were things that I was like, "This is what I'm not going to do." And then there were other things that as we went along, I was like, "We can make adjustments here, or I am comfortable with this." First of all, I want to say thank you for saying that it was a perfect match because I didn't feel that way initially when I got the role. I feel like there was a lot of Latinos that were like, "She doesn't represent us." And it was so hard for me. I was so heartbroken by that because I think coming straight out the gate, I freaking might as well have banderas on my forehead like "Latina!" I can't help myself, but I'm so proud. And then to have people be like, "She's urban. She doesn't represent us." And I'm like, "Well, that would make sense. I'm a girl from New York City. This is authentic to who I am, but I also recognize that there isn't one way to be Latina." And I think that that was really important for me to also show on *The Real* was, "Yes, I may not represent every single one of you, but I hope that I kicked down the door so that all of you can get representation one day." And that to me was more important than anything. So I knew that that was one thing that was really important to me to do on the show. But more than anything, to be authentically who I am so that everyone else could feel comfortable being authentically who they are. It made no sense for me to get on the show called *The Real* and be something that I'm not or talk differently and suddenly be like, "Estamos aqui, en the rrrreaaalllll." I wasn't going to suddenly be something else. I needed to be who I am. And I actually intentionally would not watch the show because I knew that I probably was going to be like, "I make so many ugly facial expressions." And I knew that if I watched it, I'd be overly critical of myself and then I wouldn't be who I am. I also didn't want to have these deep and meaningful conversations holding my face up perfectly, sucking in my cheekbones.

Menendez: I was about to say arms away from the body.

Bailon-Houghton: Yes, exactly. Let's not have some armpit cleavage and things of that... I literally did not watch it because I was like, "Just be who you are. Make the ugly muecas and just be the way that you are. And so for me, the main thing I promised myself specifically when talking about other people was to always bring the subject back to me. So you could be like, "Paris Hilton says she, whatever, whatever, whatever." And it could be really easy to be like, "Well, I don't know why she... If I was her, I would..." And I made it a really conscious effort to go, "Here's the story. Here are the facts that we have. One time when I was 12, I went through such and such and such, and this is how I felt about it then. I can't imagine what she went through, but I can take this story and flip it to bring to light something I learned or something I've personally experienced."

Menendez: I love that. I love that. I love that even in just conversation about moms at the PTO, it's less like chismosa and it's more just like "This is how I relate to the conversation that we're having."

Bailon-Houghton: Absolutely.

Menendez: It strikes me, one of the things I didn't know about you, this is shame on me for not knowing this was the extent to which you are a person of faith, Adrienne, and the way in which that is a big part of your life and who you are. Can you tell me about a time through this journey, whether it's professional or personal, when you felt that that faith was most tested?

Bailon-Houghton: Ooh, being misunderstood. I remember there was a time where I couldn't stand next to a rapper or a male figure without it being rumored that I was... And that was really hard for me. And I thank God for one of my best friends, Angie Martinez, who sat me down one time and was just like, "Listen, we need to figure out where this is coming from and you also need to recognize any role you might be playing in this narrative." And that for me was really hard to hear, but as women in general in our twenties, we're trying to learn who we are, and I was like, "Well, I'm still on this journey trying to figure out who it is God wants me to be." And there was something in that conversation that I was like, "I need to represent who I am in here and what does that mean? Like what does that mean on the inside?"

And ultimately, I wanted to be a light. And how can I do that and how can I be that? How can I show that not just through... Everybody's not going to be there in your prayer corner. Everybody doesn't hear your heart. They don't meet your heart. That's the reality. They meet your Instagram profile. And I started thinking to myself and being intentional about how can I reflect who I am in those quiet moments with God on a daily basis? How can I be a representation of love, of light? How can I use the platforms that I have to remind somebody that there's hope, that there's something greater to believe in, that there's something greater to answer to? And I think that that has been really helpful.

I honestly believe the greatest moments that my faith has really come in is when I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know how to control it. Especially in this industry, you don't know when your next job is going to come. You don't know what's going to happen. Genuinely having faith that God is in control of my destiny, that's what's for me will be for me. What is not for me is not for me. That when a door closed, it wasn't rejection, it was God's protection. That every little thing in my life has had its purpose and its plan, and it's all been ordained by God. That for me, lets me just sit back, breathe and be the best version of Adrienne I can be and let God do the rest.

Menendez: You had a huge inflection point in your career, so I imagine that you're also leaning on that faith heavily in this moment, and it has really borne incredible fruit. You have this show that you're hosting, Love for the Ages. I saw that development deal with NBC, which is huge. I think it's just so cool. I watched your YouTube channel and I love that you are really embracing your role as a producer and your role as a person who can figure out what people want and deliver it to them directly, which I think is really interesting. How are you thinking about this next chapter?

Bailon-Houghton: This next chapter? There's so much that I still want to do, but if I'm honest, I want to work smarter, not harder, especially as a mom now, my main priority really is being a present parent for my son. Literally, his little feet were dangling over here. A second ago I was like, "Oh hey." But even with All Things Adrienne, we're now starting this new series called Happily Ever Houghton. That was the hashtag for my wedding. Also how I got my son's name and it's really going to be more family. I recognize that so much of my life that people don't know is my family, so I'm excited for that. I'm excited about finally sharing my fertility journey in a series we're calling Faith and Familia, because Lord knows I had to have a lot of faith to create the little family that I have.

Menendez: Let me jump in here for those who don't know the story, which is multiple rounds of IVF, a miscarriage, and ultimately you decide to go with surrogacy, which is because you and I are exactly the same age, a conversation now that I'm having much more frequently with girlfriends, sometimes about what would be a second child. Different circumstances. Very

complicated. For a Latina who's listening, surrogacy... Infertility, period, there's so much stigma around, but surrogacy, should you be privileged enough to have the resources that surrogacy is even an option, there is still so much stigma to get over in your own mind, in the mind of others. What is your counsel? What would you say to someone else who's thinking about it right now?

Bailon-Houghton: Ooh, this is a tough one. I was going through fertility treatments for over six years to land where we were to even get to that point. And crazy enough, now looking back, I think it was suggested to me maybe in year two, and it wasn't until four years later after that that I even considered it for exactly the reasons you're talking about. Since I was 12 years old, I've had hips and I was told that they were going to be amazing for childbearing. I am Latina. If you look at me, I will get pregnant. And yet here I was at 33 years old trying, and it was not happening. I went in actually originally, crazy enough because I thought, this is so wild. How ignorant of me to be like, "It seems very glamorous to have twins. My husband's had boy and girl, but he's never had twins. How about we go for that?" And that's how I actually even ended up in a fertility office, not because I ever thought that something was wrong with me or that I'd ever have any difficulty. That never even crossed my mind. I was in a doctor's office because I was like, "We should go for twins." And when I got there, they did my egg count and they're like, "You might want to reconsider this." There's actually so much going on here that we really should dive into. And I did. And then the surrogacy option came up because I continued to implant embryos that I barely had any of, and I either would miscarry or it wouldn't take. So here I was at the time with my last embryo, which was my son who had, crazy enough, been in the freezer for five years at that point.

And I was fighting it. I was fighting it because the reality is I didn't want someone else to carry my child. I wanted to carry my child. I wanted that experience. I wanted to feel my child move inside of me. I wanted to, shoot, have bomb maternity photos. I wanted to have my husband see my body transform and have that... I wanted all of those things. And even when it came up... And I love that my mom will be really honest about this now, she was like, "Why would you want somebody else to carry your baby for you?" And it was so frowned upon that I was heartbroken by that. Even the people that walked with me through it, my sister, my mom, they were there with me. But the reality is they were able to conceive and have babies naturally, and it was easier for them.

And I think it was just hard for them to wrap their minds around why it wasn't easy for me. And I finally broke down. I said, "You don't think I've tried it all? I want it more than you do, trust me." And I think it was just in that moment, they heard me for the first time and my sister said the greatest thing I've ever heard. And it was, "What do you want? What is it that you want, Adrienne?" And I said, "I want a baby." If that's the ultimate goal and that's the end goal, it doesn't matter how you get there.

She was like, "You are going to be a mother and it's going to be amazing." And I have to be honest, I pulled my son out myself, literally pulled him out, and I was the first touch he ever had, and I held him close. And in those moments, I was like, I wouldn't change a thing. I wouldn't change the journey. It is definitely a privileged opportunity for sure. Which is why ultimately my goal for this whole Faith and Familia concept is to really start a foundation that raises money so that people can have more opportunities for fertility.

Menendez: Adrienne, you've been so generous with your time. I have loved talking to you. Is there anything that I missed?

Bailon-Houghton: No, I'm super excited for Love for the Ages. That's the project that I get to do on Telemundo Plus and Peacock streaming. Back with mi gente, and they are wild on this show. It is insanity. And if you thought novellas were good, this is taking it to another level. These are three couples who are at a crossroads in their relationship and they're wondering if they should be with possibly younger people. Should we explore what's out there? So the show is crazy. It's interesting, and I think that just on a psychological level, I watch it and I'm like, "Make it make sense." There's so many wild things, and so I cannot wait for everyone to tune in.

Menendez: Adrienne, thank you so much for doing this.

Bailon-Houghton: Thank you. It means so much to me.

Menendez: Thank you as always for listening. Latina To Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our producer. Trendel Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram or tweet us @LatinatoLatina. Check out our merchandise latinatolatina.com/shop. Remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share the podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us grow as a community.

CITATION:

Menendez, Alicia, host. "Adrienne Bailon-Houghton Wouldn't Change the Journey" *Latina to Latina*, LWC Studios. January 30, 2023. LatinatoLatina.com.

Produced by:

