



Why Comedian Anjelah Johnson-Reyes is Questioning (Almost) Everything

What is it like to have incredible success at something other than your big dream? What happens when you stop trying to prove yourself to others? Or when you begin to interrogate the things you once took as absolutes? Those are just some of the big questions comedian Anjelah Johnson-Reyes tackles in her new book, *Who Do I Think I Am? Chola Wishes and Caviar Dreams*.

Alicia Menendez: Anjelah Johnson-Reyes went viral in 2007 and quickly became one of the most well-known Latina comedians in the country. But that dream wasn't her actual dream, and the path to get there bumpier than you might imagine. She has put it all into her new book, *Who Do I Think I Am? Chola Wishes and Caviar Dreams*. Anjelah, I wanted to have you on this podcast for so long, so thank you for making the time to do it.

Anjelah Johnson-Reyes:
Really?

Menendez: Yeah!

Johnson-Reyes: Thank you.

Menendez: You grew up wanting to be an actress, but you were ashamed to tell anyone.

Johnson-Reyes: Yes.

Menendez: Why?

Johnson-Reyes: Because I grew up in San Jose, California, and where do you see actors in San Jose, California? You don't. I didn't know anything about acting. It felt so far-fetched to say. I might as well say I want to be a princess. That's how far-fetched it was, and it's embarrassing. Who says, "I want to be a princess when I grew up"? Nobody says that. It's embarrassing, and that's how I felt about acting. So I was like, let me just tuck this away in my heart and not tell anybody.

Menendez: Except you didn't just tuck it away in your heart. You found a way to express yourself, and that was cheerleading.

Johnson-Reyes: Sure. I mean, I grew up cheerleading my whole life, but cheerleading was always separate from being an actress. Cheerleading was like, I love stunts and tumbling and all that kind of stuff.

Menendez: There's a moment you recount where you're auditioning to be an Oakland Raiders cheerleader, and they call your number, number 193, and you say, "Oh my God, I'm going to be a cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders. In that moment, I knew I was going to be an actress." So you knew. You knew that they were somehow connected.

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Johnson-Reyes: I had used my sign, my tryout for the Raiders as a sign. I had a friend who moved to Hollywood and she was in a Ross commercial. She was in an NSYNC music video, and I was like, "Oh my God, I know somebody famous." I remember talking to her and saying, "Hey, I want to do what you're doing one day." And she was like, "Well, if you ever move to LA, I'll help you get started and I'll help show you the ropes." So now this far-fetched fantasy was becoming more of an attainable dream that I could actually go for.

Johnson-Reyes: Around that same time, I had another friend who was a cheerleader for the Oakland Raiders, and she was like, "Hey, you should come try out." And I was like, "No, that's not really my thing." And she was like, "Well, tryouts are next week" or whatever. I started to think about it. I started to pray about it and I was like, "You know what, God? I'm going to go to this Raiderette tryout, and if I make the squad, I'm going to do it for one year and then I'm going to move to Hollywood and I'm going to pursue my dreams to be an actress. And if I don't make the squad, then I'm going to use that as my sign that this is not for me." So I went to the tryouts. I ended up making the squad, and in that moment, I knew I was going to be an actress, because that was just my sign.

Menendez: Those of us who found you after you became very famous, it's not lost on me that it was not a glamorous rise, right? There are the cheerleading years. There's the being an extra on Friends. There's a slew of commercials. And then there's also a period where things just run real dry.

Johnson-Reyes: Yeah, yeah.

Menendez: And you find comedy in what I would argue is the most surprising of ways, which is like, it's a class at church.

Johnson-Reyes: Yeah. I was going to this church at the time where it was entertainment industry-friendly. A lot of entertainers go to this church. Whether you wanted to be an actor, a director, a producer, whatever, you probably went to this church. On Tuesday nights, they would do creative arts night, where they would have dance class, acting class, production class. Whatever you wanted to learn in the industry, you could come and learn it here.

Johnson-Reyes: I was in the acting class and we would play improv games, and I was funny in the improv games. There was a woman there teaching. She came up to me and she was like, "Hey, I'm going to be teaching a joke-writing standup comedy class. Would you like to take my class?" And I was like, "I don't know. Is it free?" And she's like, "Yeah." So I was like, "Sure, I'll take it. I don't care." I took her class, and one of the first jokes that I wrote in that class was this nail salon bit that ended up blowing up my spot on YouTube years later.

Menendez: Yeah, it blew up your spot. It made you a global phenomenon. I mean, it's wild.

Johnson-Reyes: Crazy.

Menendez: For you, it does mean a ton of meetings. It does mean you get some better management, a better agent, but it's not as though it's all easy from that point. There are hiccups along the way. So then how do you stay in it?

Johnson-Reyes: For me personally, there's one thing when you have something that you want to do. You're like, "I'd like to do that one day." But then it's another thing when you feel like you're called to something, when you feel like you're supposed to be there, like you're right where



you're supposed to be. I also stayed in it because my sister, when I was out of money and I was on unemployment and my unemployment checks had run out, my sister was sending me money to pay my rent. She was sending me gift certificates to the grocery store so that I could eat food. My mom has sent me... I mean, at some point, even my little brothers who were still in high school would send me money. They got 50 bucks and they would send it to me.

Johnson-Reyes: Everybody was trying to help me make this work, but I can now look back and understand you're right where you're supposed to be, because that is life. Life is this rollercoaster. You're up and then you're down. You're up and then you're down. Everything is temporary. It's like, you'll be the hottest thing in the world one day, and then the next day, you're not. Everybody's talking about somebody else. But then guess what? Maybe a year goes by, and guess what? Everybody's talking about you again. That's part of the journey. It's hard when you're in the low part, and it's hard to be like, "Okay, my time's coming. My time's coming." Especially if a few years go by and you're like, "Oh, my time's coming. My time's coming." After a while, you're like, "Is my time coming or was that the peak? Did I peak?" You know?

Menendez: I know that is one of the several things that I was really able to latch onto in your story, and one of them is this idea of being Latina enough. In your desire at some point in your life to prove to other people that you were Latina or to prove to yourself, perhaps, that you were Latina, what were the sort of hoops you jumped through? What were the performances you did? What were the things that you chased in that desire to prove it?

Johnson-Reyes: I grew up wanting to be more Latino than I felt that I was, because I didn't speak Spanish and my last name was Johnson. I wanted to be a chola, but nobody was scared of little payasa Johnson. It didn't have the same ring to it, but there's a part of me that is like, "I'm good." Just like I said, I'm right where I'm supposed to be. I didn't grow up speaking Spanish. This is my life, and the fact that I don't speak Spanish has given me a lot of material on stage to talk about. I remember when I first started doing standup, the bookings I would get were Latino nights at the club. It was like Refried Fridays at the Improv or whatever. And I would try to be who I thought people wanted me to be.

Johnson-Reyes: There's this voice, this character that I can put on that I jump into very easily, and I do it throughout my act today. But when I do it, people know that I'm putting it on, that I'm doing a little extra. This is my way of showing you that I'm getting sassy right now, whatever. If I'm talking, I'm telling you a story about me and my husband getting in an argument, and then in that argument, I turn into this character, people know I'm putting that on right now.

Menendez: Right. And just for our listeners, the hands are moving. The neck is moving. It is a whole thing.

Johnson-Reyes: Oh, she's getting real sassy, listeners. She's getting real sassy. But on stage, when I first started doing standup, I would try to be like that all the time, like if that was just my personality. And it was very like, "Hey, you don't even know," and she talks like this a little bit, which was funny, but it wasn't me. It's me when I want that to be. That was me when I

was young. I was like 14. I would talk like this all the time. Yeah, I would try to prove myself in that way and try to be like, "See, I'm Latina. See, look it. I talk like this." You know?

Johnson-Reyes: When I first started writing jokes about my parents, they spoke in broken English. My parents don't even speak Spanish, but when I would portray them on stage, my mom was like, "Ay mija, you throwing the ball this far?" She would talk like that, but my mom doesn't talk like that. But that's who I thought people wanted from me.

Menendez: Can you tell me a little bit about how you see the role that your faith has played in this entire journey?

Johnson-Reyes: I mean, listen. My faith has been what's grounded me through this whole journey. My faith has been my compass, has been what I come back to when I feel shaky, when I feel confused, when I feel, what should I be doing? And my faith has evolved since I started in this industry, for sure. My faith has grown and evolved, but it's still what I come back to, my center.

Menendez: And there's a push and pull there. I mean, there's a great moment that you share in the book where there's an opportunity to be in a film and there is a concern on your part that it is a little too raunchy, and that film ends up being, dum dum dum...

Johnson-Reyes: Pitch Perfect.

Menendez: Pitch Perfect. PG-13. What was your takeaway? What did you learn from that entire experience?

Johnson-Reyes: I made the decision to not do that movie because I thought it was going to be raunchy, and it was not raunchy, and I definitely went through seasons of regretting. My husband and I still look back and go, "Ah, what an idiot!" You know? So I still think it was a dumb decision, but it was my decision, and I'm right where I'm supposed to be because of that decision. But I was trying to be, again, who I thought people wanted me to be. Like, I thought that would be a good Christian move. At the time of my life, that's where I was. I was like, "I want to honor my pastors. I want to honor my church, and I'm sure this was probably not a good idea, so let me not do it."

Menendez: Talk to me about the transition from Anjelah. I'm going to say this wrong. Is it Funjelah?

Johnson-Reyes: Yeah, Funjelah.

Menendez: Funjelah. How are Anjelah and Funjelah different, and what has it required of you to go from Anjelah to Funjelah?

Johnson-Reyes: Anjelah is the more square, rigid version of myself. She is the one who helped me get to where I am today, because she had some strong moral boundaries. She was like, "Nope, we're not going out. We're staying in. We're not going to drink alcohol because this could happen." And then Funjelah is the more evolved, relaxed version of myself that's like, "You know what? I'm not going to go to hell if I say a cuss word. I'm not going to go to hell if I drink a margarita." Funjelah is the version of me that loves God, that loves people, that loves herself, and also loves a nice tequila soda.

Menendez: You talk about deconstructing. You have this set of beliefs and ideas, and then as an adult... And this, I think, happens for people in different forms. For you, part of it is faith, these rules you might have around alcohol, swearing. For someone else, it might be

something else, like a different belief system that they have held. The process of deconstructing that, which I know can be like a bad word in some circles, what have you gained in being willing to do that deconstruction and what have you lost?

Johnson-Reyes: Let's start with, what have I lost? Relationships, friendships, certain support systems, invites, stuff like that. What have I gained? Oh, man. I have gained freedom. I have gained a new community. I have gained a new support system. By taking God out of the box that I have kept God in for the past whatever, 30 years of faith life that I've had, I've kept God in this box. This is the way it works. God stays right here because these are the rules. This is what this scripture says. This is what this scripture says. This one and this one, that creates the four walls of this box. And then as I started deconstructing and being like, oh wait, is that really God or is that church culture? I think that's church culture, and then I move this wall from the box.

Johnson-Reyes: It's like, wait, is this really God or is this something that I was just taught growing up and it goes on a bumper sticker and on a magnet, or is that God? I don't think it is. That wall goes off. And then as I start asking these questions and these walls come off, and then God expands in my life and becomes so much bigger, so much more powerful, so much more in everything, it's like I can see God in so many things. I have more empathy for people. I feel more relaxed and not so like my younger, rigid self, like, "No, don't take that movie part because there's a dirty joke in there." What? Relax, relax. Same thing.

Johnson-Reyes: I feel like I can have conversations with friends now that I couldn't have before because they always felt like I was judging them, because I probably was. And now I can have these conversations and hold space for people who are just humans living their life, going through stuff, and now I can hold space for them without judgment. It's evolved to a place where I can say, "Come as you are. Worship God as you are. Everybody's welcome." Whatever's going on in your life, your sexuality, your faith, your family, whatever is going on, we can sit here.

Menendez: You write pretty honestly about your marriage, which I really appreciated. And as someone who travels a lot and has a husband who has a big job, you share some really great details, tips, tricks for how, if you're going to be apart, because you had to learn this, how you maintain that sense of intimacy with your partner when you're not always together. Of that, if someone wants to take away one thing from what you have learned, what is it?

Johnson-Reyes: My husband and I went to a therapist early on in our marriage because we were both touring. We were both apart from each other. We needed to figure out how to make our marriage work. The best lesson we learned from that therapist that we still apply today, when you're away from your partner and you want to grow that intimacy, there's a question that you ask, and you say, "What is something that you thought today that you wouldn't have told me if I didn't ask you?" Because we have a lot of thoughts, thousands of thoughts that run through our mind every day that we just keep it internal.

Johnson-Reyes: When you pause to think about maybe some of your darker thoughts, maybe some of your insecure thoughts or things like that, things that you wouldn't typically say out loud or share with someone, you share it with the person you love the most, and that is a form of



intimacy. I'm letting you see into me. That, when my husband was on this part of the world and I was on this part of the world and we would ask each other that question, it would allow us to be in each other's space and hold space for each other. It would also give us things to talk about that weren't, "Hey, how was your show?" "Good. How was your show?" "Good. I'm tired." "Me too." "Okay. Good night. Talk to you tomorrow," and then the same conversation tomorrow. It helped you get out of that routine.

Menendez: I want to ask you a question as a creative, because there was a moment at the end of the book where I nearly lost my breath, and that is your manager, your agents. At this point, you have a multitude of people on your team. They come back to you and they're like, "Anjelah, nobody wants to buy your one-hour special. They're looking for something fresh. They're looking for something new." How do you generate something that feels, not to someone else, but to you, feels new, feels fresh?

Johnson-Reyes: For me, it works in different ways. Sometimes I need a break. I need to come off the road. I need to go live life and just go be. And in that living life is when material comes, because all of my material comes from real life. And if you're not living life, what are you talking about on stage? Sometimes it's checking back in with myself. Also, am I in a state of mind, a place in my life where creativity flows out of me or am I blocked? Have I been exercising? Have I been doing my morning devotional, where I spend time praying? Have I been meditating? Have I been getting in tune with myself, in tune with God, shutting off all the noise around me?

Johnson-Reyes: If I haven't, then I'm probably blocked in a lot of areas. If I have, then that's when things start to flow freely. Love flows more freely. Creativity flows more freely when you get in tune and in alignment with yourself and with God. A lot of times, if I am creatively blocked, it usually is because I'm feeling heavy and I'm not in a good just space as a person, as a human, and I need to go realign.

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

Johnson-Reyes: Thank you for having me. This has been great.

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. Manuela Bedoya is our Marketing Lead. Kojin Tashiro is our Associate Sound Designer and mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. It makes our day. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com. Slide into our DMs on Instagram. Tweet us at Latina to Latina. Check out our merchandise that is on our website, latinatolatina.com/shop. And remember, please subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you are listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you share an episode, every time you leave a review, it helps us to grow as a community.

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