



Why Our Friend Dessa Likes Picking Brains Apart

She's a rapper, a performer, a complete science geek, and now a podcast creator and host. And *Deeply Human*, her new show from the BBC, doesn't stray far from her ambitious curiosity and insatiable creative appetite. In short, it's all the things we've come to love about Dessa.

Alicia Menendez:

The first time we spoke with Dessa, she gave us an inside look into the world of indie music. Now she's back to talk about something completely different. Her new podcast, *Deeply Human*, explores all of my favorite questions. What drives human behavior, why we do what we do, and why we are the way we are.

I realize that this is the pot calling the kettle black, but did you not have enough hyphens in your multihyphenate existence that you needed to add podcaster to the list?

Dessa: I mean, okay, so on one hand, I feel like you can kind of... You can chalk that up to like a feather in the hat, right? Or you can be like, "My hat is only made of feathers." Do you know what I mean? There's no other way to get a hat. I just feel like monetizing indie music is tricky, and in a luckier way, I feel like I like language, you know? Wherever it goes. And it feels like in some ways, the lane partitions about what counts as a writer, versus what counts as a performer, versus what counts as a singer, those are way more useful for marketing stuff than they are for making stuff. I like words and I do anything that has words in it, you know?

Menendez: The connection between the brain and the heart and one's life choices is very personal for you. We've talked about this before. But for those who didn't listen to our first conversation, can you take me back to 2018 when you turned to neuroscience to overcome heartbreak?

Dessa: Yeah. Fell in love with this dude in my early 20s. Super rocky, volatile, but very intense. A lot of sweet moments, but a lot of like devastating moments, too. And when it was time to fall out of love with this guy, I just didn't seem to be able to pull that trick off. I just stayed in this really... I don't know, this heartbroken place that it seemed like my peers were able to recover from. Everybody falls down and takes a nosedive sometimes with love, but I just like wasn't getting back up. And that persisted for so long, for so many years essentially that it was becoming like A, a point of embarrassment, and B, kind of a character-defining thing, which I didn't like. And affecting my music, which is like the way that I make most of my money, right? I'm just writing torch songs over and over again.

And so, after a lot of years of not being able to get out of it, I decided to sort of like undertake it as a project instead of waiting to fall out of love, figuring like, "Is there some way that I can actively make this happen?" And so, I started researching the science of love, and attachment, and heartbreak, and ended up convincing a couple of researchers

to work with me to see if we could change the way that my brain was functioning to lessen those feelings of attachment.

Menendez: You've applied the question to love and to heartbreak. What other topics are you going to be applying this question to?

Dessa: Yeah. I mean, okay, so I know why we do it in shorthand conversations. I think a lot of times with these things, like are you acting from your heart or are you acting with your head? Or are you being guided by your gut? And I know what we mean. I mean, those are kind of metaphorical constructions. But at the same time, I think if we take them too literally, they don't really serve us. There's not like a clean way to partition human action, I don't think. It's like we are this combination of body and mind, and instinct, and rationality, and habit, and unconscious. It doesn't cleave apart real neat and easy like that.

And so, I think I've been interested in trying to figure out how much of the decisions that we're making, and our behavior actually originates from stuff other than our conscious cognition. Because we're real aware of the thing, like when you sit down with your friend and you're like, "Why'd you do what you do?" All the reasons that you'd say out loud, like you can feel your own mind thinking, but you can't feel your instincts at work. So, you have to be really deliberate about taking a hand mirror to that. I'll say that some of the questions are kind of frivolous, like why do you get déjà vu? I have no idea if that serves a purpose or if that's just like a weird evolutionary glitch, you know?

Also, like why do we like... I don't know. Why are we attracted to symmetrical faces? What's with our hang up on symmetry and how does that relate to [inaudible] of beauty. What's up with superstition? Why are some people more superstitious than others and what drives that, you know? So, those are some of the kinds of questions that we...

Menendez: Ooh. I was already in because of episode one, but now I'm deeply in. Episode one, you start with your mom, and you are asking her who she thinks or what she imagines as a good partner or fit for you. Let's take a listen.

Dessa: When you looked at me little, did you have any idea of the sort of partner that I'd end up with? Did you think about that? About me dating when I was little?

Dessa's Mom: I think a parent always thinks that way. Because once you have your wonderful child, you want to make sure that they have a wonderful future. Even when I took a look at the four year old, this was a curious mind. And I think when I think about your dating, I can only imagine that it would be someone who would be equally curious. I think that being a physical person, the physical strength of the person you're with actually matters.

Dessa: What do you mean? Like someone I can't win in an arm wrestling match?

Dessa's Mom: Yes. Someone who could pick you up and twirl you around.

Dessa: Okay. Just for the record, I'm like 145 pounds and 5'10", so that narrows it down.

Dessa's Mom: There are a lot of guys out there like that, though.

Dessa: Do you know what Tinder is? Do you know what the app, Tinder?

Dessa's Mom: Yes.

Dessa: Next time we have lunch, do you want to drive my Tinder app and you can swipe left or right and you can tell me?

Dessa's Mom: Oh, sure. That would be kind of fun.

Menendez: Why call your mom?

Dessa: Okay, so probably two reasons. One is that I wanted to make sure that in all of the episodes... You know, as I'm interviewing experts in their fields and really innovative researchers, I don't want it to just be clinical. I want it to relate to lived human experience and to how we're actually making our choices for some of those most intimate choices and experiences, like my life is the only life that I have permission to share secrets within, so when it comes to really intimate content, like I have to be my only case study, because I'm the only volunteer.

And then I wanted to talk to my mom in part because she also had a really interesting story about finding her partner. She's been married more than once. And she knows me really well, so the counsel that she would give me I think in some ways represents the listener's take. Like we're all untrained, essentially, in the science of choice, as we're running around trying to find mates. And I don't know, I thought maybe my mom could provide some interesting... kind of like a foil to the kind of clinical language that we might use in other ways. And also, she's funny.

Menendez: She was really funny and really sweet, and she does seem to know you really well, which is also sweet, because I think sometimes that that could have gone sideways.

Did you actually let her drive your Tinder?

Dessa: I did. I handed her my phone. I mean, it's sort of... It's not like she's arranging my marriage, right? It's Tinder. But I was really curious. I didn't know if she would be scandalized by the... I don't know, just the format itself. And I was surprised that she had such strong opinions immediately about these dudes, like hella judgey. And I think in some ways it also just... Like handing your mother your account essentially, like A, it does call into question how well do the people who know us help us choose? Which in a lot of cultures outside of the U.S. is a really big part of mate finding. It's not frivolous, that question, you know what I mean? Parents are very often involved with picking people for their kids to marry. And then second, it just sort of put a human story to how new the technologies that we're using are to find this kind of elemental companionship, right? Like 20 years ago, no one was doing it this way. And now a lot of people are doing it this way.

So, just to like... I don't know, I guess provide my mom as a member of a different generation a glimpse into the way that my generation is working at it.

Menendez: I squealed midway through the first episode of Deeply Human because you interview Barry Schwartz, who wrote a book that clarified life for me, The Paradox of Choice, and the core thesis, you'll tell me if I'm getting this right, is that having more choices makes it harder to choose, and out of that, the distinction between maximizers and satisficers. Can you describe the difference between a maximizer and a satisficer?

Dessa: It sort of like similarly struck a bell in my brain that vibrated my skull for a minute. So, there are roughly two ways to go about choosing. They're not necessarily discreet, but they can help kind of serve as general guidelines. The first kind of method that somebody might use is maximization, where you're trying to make sure that you get like the very best of

what's on offer. You know, so whether you're choosing a frame for your glasses, or whatever, apples at the supermarket, or a dude on Tinder, the idea is that you're trying to see what all of your options are and then walk with the very best one. Alternatively, you could be a satisficer, which is to say that you know exactly what your lists of desires are, and as soon as you find an option that satisfies those desires, you're good to go.

You know, so you want frames for your glasses that are cat-eyed, librarian, sexy, and that are under \$200, and that arrive to your door within six days. And as soon as you find that pair, you're good to go. You're not gonna stay on the Warby Parker site for the extra 45 minutes to try to find that best pair.

Menendez: I have literally been trying to buy new glasses for about six years, so the fact that this is your example is pretty perfect, because I am a hardcore maximizer. Like if I am driving down the highway and I see a McDonald's, I'd be like, "Oh, let's cool. Let me see what else is down there. Oh, Burger King? I wonder what else is down there?" And then I will get to my destination hungry because I've spent the entire ride wondering if there will be an even better option. So, you, I mean, you're a maximizer. You're clearly a maximizer.

Dessa: Welcome to my crisis.

Menendez: Maximizer-satisficer to me only overshadowed potentially by the asker-guesser paradigm. Do you know about that? Where it's like an asker will ask you for anything because they always feel that you have the capacity to say no. And a guesser, they feel that when they are asked for things that the thing they're being asked for is a mandate, and they would never want to put someone else in that position, and so they will ask a million questions around the thing they want in the hopes they will ultimately land where they want to land. So, an asker would say, "Dessa, can I sleep on your couch on Saturday?" A guesser like me would be like, "Hey, Dessa. Got any plans on Saturday? How's your apartment looking? Do you have a roommate?" Like a million questions to get to the point where then you just magically offer me-

Dessa; God, I've been hoping someone would sleep on this couch. Right? Yeah. Definitely. Definitely a guesser over here.

Menendez: It explains so much, because I think before I learned all of these things, where I find them helpful is that I thought as a guesser that askers were just trying to drive me nuts. And I thought as a maximizer that satisficers didn't have the same standards that I had. They do. You can have really sharp standards. You're just not driving yourself nuts with this idea that there's something better out there always.

Dessa: And I think also, like I wouldn't have been able to maybe articulate it as clearly, but as I've grown older, maximizing, maximizing, maximizing, I've become more acutely aware of the price of deliberation. That isn't costless. Try to find the absolute cheapest let's say solution to your problem. I don't know, a pillow top for your mattress, right? If it takes you 14 hours to find that, then you have to factor in what your hourly rate is usually for 14 hours. Like add that to the cost of the pillow top.

Menendez: The number of lost hours for me in trying to score just the best possible deal with all the add-ons, where it's like even as I'm in the checkout I'm like, "Let me just check to make sure there are no codes."

Dessa: 100%. I have eight things in my cart, right? Just in case. Because I know I'm gonna delete seven of them, but God, if I spend another... It's 1:00 AM. I could still look for another hour.

Menendez: How then, though, has that all applied to romance and dating?

Dessa: I would maybe start the caveat that it got tricky, because like right after that episode was recorded, pretty shortly after COVID hit. You know, so obviously there's been an externality that has disrupted dating and all of the parts of human life in an unpredictable way. I think the idea that compatibility is like discovered, as opposed to developed, it's like numbers, right? Discovered or invented. I think that I take that more seriously now, like the idea that relationship was work wasn't a foreign one to me. That naturally resonates, at least in my past, my experience so far. But the idea that like hey, for all the swiping let's say that you're doing if you're dating online, how much time did you spend on that? How much time did you spend on that app? And what's your ROI on that investment, do you know what I'm saying? Saying no for two hours doesn't actually get you anything, like at all, and maybe it would be better, even if I wanted dates that don't lead to lifelong partnerships, like maybe it would be better to spend one of those hours in conversation with a human being.

What is the cost of my constant deliberation here? And knowing that like time is finite. Is that how you want to spend it? You're going, "No. No." It's not super rad. That doesn't feel like a great way to spend life.

Menendez: I met my husband when I was 26, and so we were semi-formed humans, but we've had the last 11 years to grow together, which as you said is work, and there are definitely places where our preferences are different, and where they're the same, but I also imagine that if I started dating someone now, that in some ways it would be easier because I would have a clearer sense of who I am, and what I want, and what I need, but that it would also be much more challenging because I am much more accustomed to doing things the way that I do them. And so, this question about compatibility, even just in like a very day-to-day lived way of like what temperature is the thermostat at? When do I get out of bed? All of those things I imagine would be harder now.

Dessa: You don't get two shots at the same life, right? So, all of us are sort of guessing what it would have been like on the other side. I feel like I am a lock with more tumblers. It just takes more to reach compatibility in that the list of things I'm looking for is longer. Maybe not because I'm... Maybe it is just more persnickety, but like at 20, for me anyway, like in my early 20s, I made about as much money as everybody else I knew in my early 20s, which was not that much. So, there's no big striation, even if there would be as we went on, there was no big striation, and if someone was like, "What city do you want to live in?" I was like, "I don't know. This is where I am in the early 20s." You know, like who has the means to run around choosing their cities? Are you out of your mind?

Whereas now, yeah, there's more preferences, and habits, and everything else I think to be considered. Yeah, it's just it's a more complicated puzzle piece.

Menendez: Your parents, like mine, are divorced. Did you learn anything about how that experience shapes your brain or your thinking about romance?

Dessa: I have strong ideas about it, but I think one of the things that I've also been wondering lately is how do we test our introspection? Sometimes things just feel right. I don't know if that's enough to always roll on. Like historically, a lot of things that felt right, they turned

out to be pretty wrong. So, intuition for me is a great first step and a really lousy last step, and so I think when thinking about my parents, I probably, as I mentioned I think in the episode, like I am probably a little gun shy in that I'm so aware of the fact that those first feelings of romance are so overwhelming but aren't the only feelings in a partnership, and I guess historically in some of my long relationships, like when I've seen a guy in the throes of a really big love for me, I'm always like, "Well, we'll wait and see, won't we?" Which is not super-

Menendez: Yeah. Clearly something is very wrong with you and I cannot wait to find out what it is.

Dessa: I'm just like, "Better enjoy that now. Okay? Because that's not always gonna be..." I mean, it's like yeah, it's like an ice cream cone. I'm like, "Well, enjoy that. It's melting."

Menendez: Beyond love, beyond heartbreak, what can the brain tell us about why we are the way we are?

Dessa: Oh, man. I think in some ways, learning about the brain can help us be more patient when other people are being super weird. I think it can help us reflect on our own decisions too, like okay, I think as a rule we tend to overestimate how much clearheaded decision making is involved in our own behavior. So, like when you read studies about how people are really primed by the environments that they're in, being mindful of the fact like, "Oh, that priming is at work on me." Even if I don't feel it. So, is it possible to be more deliberate about what I expose myself to in an effort to elicit the kind of behavior that I want?

And maybe you even see that looking on social media. I think maybe in the past year, a lot of us have reconsidered how that kind of stuff fits into our lives, like there's something absolutely attractive about it. A cheap sugar high. Very rarely after spending an hour and a half on Instagram am I like, "Time well spent."

Menendez: Here I guess is a different way though of asking the question that I just asked, which is to what extent are we really malleable or pliable? Like how much about the way we are is just fixed and how much can we actually grow and change?

Dessa: Yeah. It's a good question. I think there is a lot of capacity for change. And I also think that learning how the organisms of ourselves work could naturally prompt us to make different decisions. I mean, think about even like our generation, how much more we know about sex than like three generations ago. For a long time, that was just a mysterious part of you. There weren't... We weren't naming stuff, man. I think that it's sometimes hard to imagine how the knowledge will shape you but knowing is almost always better.

Menendez: After this deep dive on the brain, which questions do you still have?

Dessa: Oh, man. So, we just finished season one, which is like 12 episodes, and so we've just started making the brainstorming list essentially for season two. But some of the questions I do have is like why are we so sensitive to what other people think of us? I mean, to maybe use the social media thing as an example, like somebody you've never met who lives in Quebec says some hater nonsense on your selfie. Guaranteed that's gonna stick for a second for most people. But really, that has no bearing on my actual life. I'll never meet this person. It doesn't affect my job. It doesn't affect my dinner that... So, why do I have any investment in that? I think it's confusing sometimes like the way that our social sensitivities work.

Menendez: I am being super sketch, but I'm trying to read the whiteboard behind you because it's a window into your clearly maniacal process. Oh, wow. Oh, no! Dessa! Okay, so for those of you who cannot see, Dessa just tilted the camera up and what I thought was just like a normal sheet of paper with musings and plans, it's just a wall. It's just a wall of plans. How has what you've been working on with Deeply Human impacted the rest of the work that you're doing?

Dessa: I think in some way it has focused my attention on questions, which I like, because every episode of the podcast tries to answer a question. And I think just the habit of capturing questions that I want answers to is a good one. I like that. Like I remember a good teacher in high school suggested that we keep a notebook of things we wanted to better understand. And I'm reminded of just how rad it is to take your curiosity seriously. I think very often that's put aside as a kid thing. It's not a kid thing. I think it's a super important motive, you know?

So, I like that. And then I think a lot of times if stuff doesn't make it into the podcast, I'm like the creepy bottom-feeding fish who's like, "This is mine now. I'm gonna take you home with me. I'm gonna put you in a little aquarium."

Menendez: Your next album is gonna have all these strange interludes.

Dessa: Totally.

Menendez: Dessa, it's so good to see you. Thank you for doing this.

Dessa: Thank you so much for having me. This is always so sweet.

Menendez: Thank you for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Paulina Velasco is our senior producer. Our lead producer is Cedric Wilson. Kojin Tashiro is our associate sound designer. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor and ad ops lead. We love hearing from you when you email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, when you slide into our DMs on Instagram, when you tweet at us @LatinaToLatina. Remember to subscribe, follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, I know I ask this all the time, but do leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow.

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