



## How Jenny Lorenzo Became the Internet's Favorite Cuban Abuela

A co-founder of BuzzFeed's Pero Like, and an alum of MiTu, Jenny spent the early part of her career creating viral sketch videos for big media companies. Frustrated, she decided to break out on her own. In this hilarious conversation, she reveals what goes into creating her videos (she has a second bedroom dedicated to wigs and props!), gets real about the nitty-gritty of monetization, and dreams of producing a more nuanced portrayal of her hometown.

---

Alicia Menendez:

Jenny Lorenzo is many things. An actor, a writer, a producer, a self-proclaimed nerd, and your favorite Cuban abuelita. You have seen her viral videos on Instagram, YouTube, MiTu, and on BuzzFeed, where she was a co-founder of Pero Like. Now, Jenny is giving us an inside look at how her characters and her worlds come to life, how she is producing all of this in the middle of a pandemic, and the hustle, the unbelievable hustle that goes into piecing it all together.

Jenny, I'm almost, I have to admit, not accustomed to just seeing you as Jenny.

Jenny Lorenzo: Nobody is. It's like, "Is that what you look like?"

Menendez: I want to take a listen to the first Abuela video that you ever did.

Clip: Mira hijo lo que te hice, un platico de picadillo... no te voy a reconocer en unos cuantos días, vas a ser esqueleto. Perfect for trick'o'treat! Comiste? Hello, niño comiste? Si no comiste, te voy a meter un soplamos. Mira yo me voy a parar aquí, rezar a San Lazaro...plis, for the love of God, tu no quieres tu Abuela.

Lorenzo: So, here's what's interesting. It's the first video that Abuela was ever featured in for BuzzFeed, but she existed in a prior channel of mine called Aggressive Comics, and Abuela was first introduced as a superhero because this was a channel that was predominantly, you know, white male audience. I talked about video games, and comic books, and movies, sci fi, strictly me being a nerd, and then at some point I did a movie review of the film Kick-Ass 2, and me and my writing partner for the show were like, "Let's do the Cuban Abuela." Because he knew that I kind of already did that sort of thing. And so, it was the same terrible wig that you do see in that BuzzFeed video.

I think I threw like baby powder on it to make it grey, and she had this painted red mask over her eyes, with like a fly swatter as her weapon, and then eventually... It made no sense for the channel, but you can tell that I yearned to make this sort of content.

Menendez: It is interesting that something that is as big as Abuela actually takes that many iterations to get there. Like I think there's a lesson in there for any creative that it's not necessarily that the opening gambit is where you land.

Lorenzo: No. Never.

Menendez: Being a nerd is as much a part of your identity and culture as being Cuban, it seems. Did you see characters on TV or in media who as a Latina nerd you identified with?

Lorenzo: Not really. Wasn't until recently that I started seeing that representation. Especially in a show like *Los Espookys* because these are a bunch of Latino goths that are into the macabre, and they're a bunch of nerds and outsiders, because that's a big part of me, too.

Menendez: What most approximated your own experience that you saw reflected back at you?

Lorenzo: I would say a lot of that was in Black television. You see *Urkel*, you see *Carlton Banks*, a lot of these like nerdy people of color on TV. Maybe sometimes *Fez* from *That '70s Show*. To me, he had a bit of a nerdy flair to him. I feel like Latinos and Latinas specifically were usually depicted as very sensual, loud, colorful, think *Sofía Vergara* in *Modern Family*. That was the typical depiction of what a Latino was. And so, that's why I had a hard time in the audition room. I didn't fit any mold of what... especially Miami casting.

Menendez: So, paint a picture for me of what auditioning in Miami looked like.

Lorenzo: Oh my God. It was a nightmare for me. I would show up and for those who don't know me, I'm like five feet, pasty, skinny little shit, but then I have this deep voice. No one knows what to do with me. So, then I show up to these auditions and they were usually little like *Florida Lottery*, or like *Colgate*, but then I would be up against women my age, but they looked like supermodels. And then there was me. So, then I just never felt like I was sexy enough to sell toothpaste.

I remember my very, very first universal casting audition. It was for the *Florida Lottery* and I had to be like this sexy young woman, and I wore these plastic, clear stripper heels. I don't know. I don't know what I was thinking, but I was 19 years old.

Menendez: The silver lining of this terrible experience is that it motivates you to become a creator.

Lorenzo: Yeah. I was tired of this. I was so tired. And then I did a couple of extra work gigs. I was an extra on *Burn Notice* and *Dexter*, and guess what? I was scantily clad and tacky as hell. Because that's what they thought of people in Miami. All of these shows always depicted people from Miami in the same way, and it always took place in South Beach, and it always involved drugs and sex, and violence, which is another reason why I'm working so hard today to eventually sell a show that depicts Miami in a more authentic way. So, yeah, it pushed me to go to film school and learn how to do everything else on my own.

Menendez: You grew up as a drama kid, but when you went to Miami-Dade, you majored in graphic design. Why?

Lorenzo: I've always been a computer nerd, so as a 12 year old, I would spend hours and hours trying to figure out HTML and CSS coding, and I had a great computer teacher in middle school, and so I was the fastest typist in my class. I loved web design. And I started learning Photoshop on my own, and I designed all kinds of websites, and hooking up my AOL profile. So, it's something that I did love. Throughout high school, I was heavily involved in theater. I was always cast as the lead in the plays. I would go to drama competitions. I was the drama captain. So, you would think naturally I would want to go straight into theater school in college, which I did, but the reason why I didn't do it off the bat is because I was in an unhealthy, emotionally abusive relationship with a really jealous man, who didn't want me to do theater because he knew that theater would involve me

being around a bunch of dudes and potentially kissing them in plays and stuff like that. Yeah.

Menendez: So then, how did you find your way back?

Lorenzo: You know, when you love something, you love something. So, I heard so many great things about this drama professor, and she taught theater appreciation. I gotta do it for my electives. And when I was in her class, she inspired me to audition. The very first college play I ever did was Medea, and I was part of the chorus, and it's not the kind of play you would ever think to see me in. Again it's a Greek tragedy. It wasn't a comedy.

But I did it and it was such a great experience that it got me to switch my major to theater arts.

Menendez: You worked at BuzzFeed, first as an intern and then as a fellow, and much of your work was measured in virality, how a clip performs online, or social media, and it's one of my great personal frustrations how little many producers don't actually understand what constitutes a piece of work that goes viral. Like how people will say like, "Well, we need to make a viral clip." And it's like, "Well, you can't predetermine that it will be viral."

Lorenzo: No.

Menendez: So, how do you define what makes something viral?

Lorenzo: I think over time, you can get better and better at figuring out what can potentially go viral. For me, it's been studying memes. Meme culture. I study a lot of Latino memes. And seeing which ones perform the best, and why did this perform the best, and a lot of times it's tied to nostalgia and relatability. Some of my most successful videos came from memes because they're so relatable, or even if they didn't come from memes, it's really digging into your own childhood because you know people are more than likely going to relate. That, to me, has been my little golden ticket of virality. But again, it's hit or miss because sometimes I have done videos where I thought, "This is gonna really do well," and it doesn't, and then videos that you think are terrible go viral.

So, I don't know. Like you will never fully know, because the internet is a wild world.

Menendez: And some of it is just the day on which it landed, and how much else was going on in the world, and what other things were being consumed. Like in some ways, it's a good life lesson for it's not always about you. Sometimes it's just about a series of factors that are wildly outside of your control. At BuzzFeed, you felt that Latino content wasn't taken seriously. I think the resistance you ran into was really familiar. How did you get them to see the opportunity that you saw?

Lorenzo: It took more numbers. At the time, we had befriended a couple of Latino writers who worked at a completely different building somewhere else in L.A., who worked for BuzzFeed, but they wrote articles. They weren't in video. I'll never forget the day that we invited them over to the video campus and it was a ton of Latinos coming over from the other building, and we all met outside, and I'll never forget the look on people's faces going, "What's going on? What is happening?" It was the beginning of what ended up being Pero Like. It was us growing in numbers to be stronger, to get our voices heard, and thankfully we did have a lot of people on the inside who did believe in us, like Caitlin

Cowie, because once we moved onto the fellowship, she ended up becoming our team leader.

She started allowing us to do what they called Latino sprints. So, around the holidays, they were like, “For the next two weeks, all you have to worry about is making Latino content.” And so, that was us experimenting and being able to make all these videos, and that’s where you started seeing the Abuela videos. When you work for a digital media company, you’re still held under certain restrictions, even though Mitù allowed me much more freedom than BuzzFeed did at the time, it was difficult to grow as a creator, and after a while it does start to get to you that a lot of your greatest ideas are going towards a channel that isn’t your own.

A big one for me was when Netflix reached out to me because they wanted to fly me out to Colombia to shoot some stuff with the cast of Narcos as my Abuela character, and the folks at Mitù almost didn’t let me. And that was a red flag. It reminded me again of how restrictive digital media companies can be. I think they’re great when you’re starting off. You learn a lot. You gain so much experience. But after a while, you do have to move on, because they can restrict you.

Menendez: Can you take me back to the genesis of the Abuela character?

Lorenzo: She is based on my maternal grandmother, who is no longer with us. Her name was Orquídea Díaz and she pretty much was my second mother. Me being so close to the culture, aside from Miami... Miami as a city keeps you pretty close to your culture. But also, being raised by my grandparents, it’s just such a big part of who I am, and my grandma was such a character, as most people’s grandmas usually are. It was hard not to think of a character based on her.

Menendez: Once you have this core character, can you take me into your process of how you started building characters around her?

Lorenzo: The next character that I really decided to develop after Abuela was Maruchi, and Maruchi and Laritza kind of came as a two-for-one special.

Clip: *I'd rather live in a house made of caca than use dialogue. Bueno, with a house made of caca, the big, bad wolf is going to eat you, malcriada...*

Lorenzo: And it’s because growing up in Miami, I never went to a beauty salon. It was always to someone’s house, like a work from home peluquera. And so, Maruchi’s kind of based on all of them. One of my hairdressers in Miami had three daughters, all younger than me, you know, how kids are, like my hairdresser’s doing her thing, and she’s doing my hair, and then all of a sudden one of her kids would come in and be like, “Mom, where’s my... I’m hungry. Where’s my cereal?” So, that’s kind of how Laritza was born. Now, again, it’s crazy how many little pieces have to happen to make one whole character, because Laritza comes from that premise of like my hairdresser’s daughters barging in while she was working, but also I had already been using Laritza’s voice in some Disney dub parodies.

Menendez: I have to tell you, your Belle is my favorite thing in the entire world.

Clip: *Miami is a colorful city. Every day, hotter than before. Ay que calor! Party town, full of papi chulos...*

Lorenzo: That one, I did with my sister when we were at Mitù. That one went viral. That was nuts. I'm a huge Disney fan. I was like, "Let me just take these clips and Miamiify them." And so, every single Disney princess sounded like Laritza, because that was my go-to Miami girl accent. One accidental character was Michi, who is Flor's daughter. Michi was a throwaway character. That's the one character that I didn't go to a wig shop to specifically really tailor a character, which is what I normally do. I put a lot of time and energy into developing a new character, so I go clothing shopping for them, I go in person and try on wigs. That did not happen for Michi because up until her debut, I guess, Flor was just this frantic mom who would always be screaming to this imaginary family.

We never knew who her kids were or whatever. For the past I guess almost three years, I've been working with my producing partner, Kevin Bosch, who's also from Miami. He's Venezuelan-Colombian. And he just really gets it. He gets the voice. He understands the comedy. So, we were trying to develop a Latina mom sleepover premise and making it unique, because obviously I'm not the first Latina content creator to come up with this type of joke. And so, we decided, well, we should have her talking to her actual kid. And I just quickly ran to my closet. I have a second bedroom fully dedicated to wigs, costumes, props, you name it. And I just grabbed a random, short, black, bob wig, threw on some glasses. I just went in and I remember being really stressed out when I filmed that video and it ended up going viral.

A lot of people like that character, and so we kept her.

Menendez: How do these sketches go from being an idea to a video that I am watching on Instagram?

Lorenzo: So, a truth about me is that I have ADHD, which I was recently diagnosed with as an adult. I'm not always as neat and tidy as I would like to be, or what people might think, so even when I'm developing a character, do I write any of this down? Nope. It's just very intuitive. I have no idea. It just happens. But now that I've been working with Kevin for a while, we have a Google Doc and every year we lay out every single month, and under each month, we write down ideas of what could fit for those months. Does it always happen? No. Do sometimes last minute ideas come in, especially with trends like the WAP parody that we did. Sometimes I'll write an entire sketch on my own. Sometimes we write it together.

Menendez: And then how do you go about shooting them?

Lorenzo: It always feels like a 48-hour film competition, because we do them very quickly. So, it's very different with the pandemic compared to pre-pandemic, but right now, since things are really bad, it's just me and Kevin. So, Kevin does sound, he shoots everything, he lights everything. We always get co-direction credit, but it's weird, I'm like directing myself for the most part, and then yeah, so it's just the both of us, setting everything up, set designing it all by ourselves. He's doing everything behind the camera and I'm doing all the acting, and then I edit the videos. And it all happens very quickly usually.

Menendez: The big question I always come back to, especially with someone who is known primarily as an online content creator, is how are you monetizing all of this? How are you making it work?

Lorenzo: Yeah, so I know that's always the big question. I mean, I used to wonder that before I was able to become a full-time content creator. I'm like, "How are these people making money?" The biggest way for me has been branded content. It has been my main bread and butter. You know, say like Snickers, which I've worked with before, they... usually a

brand will hire agencies to go out and reach out to influencers depending on the market. I have been very blessed to have worked with so many brands over the past few years that I've been going solo as a content creator, but it's because I'm a niche brand. I'm a Latina in the U.S. market who does comedy. Not a lot of Latinas on YouTube or Instagram do comedy in the U.S. They usually do makeup, or fashion, and also I do take a lot of pride in the fact that my videos are really high quality. I put a lot of work into it. I play multiple characters. I have a very loyal and engaged audience.

So, while I may not have millions of followers, I do have a very loyal fan base. So, I do Cameo, I have... I sell merchandise. And then obviously, I'm a voice actor, so I'm on two shows right now. I have income coming from different places, but it's a constant hustle. And you just can't stop.

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

Lorenzo: Oh my gosh. Thank you so much for this. This was a great interview.

Menendez: Thank you, Jenny. Anything you need, you know where to find me. You have my email now.

Lorenzo: Of course.

Menendez: Okay.

Lorenzo: Thank you.

Menendez: Bye. Have a good day.

Lorenzo: Bye! You too.

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](mailto: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.

#### **CITATION:**

Menendez, Alicia, host. "How Jenny Lorenzo Became the Internet's Favorite Cuban Abuela." *Latina to Latina*, Lantigua Williams & Co., February 14, 2021. [LatinatoLatina.com](http://LatinatoLatina.com)

Produced by:

