



Why Social Media Star Vanessa Sirias Takes Social Media Breaks

When the pandemic hit, she lost her news job and doubled down on creating her own content. Now, as a creator and influencer with hundreds of thousands of social media followers, Vanessa explains how her early foray into YouTube (doing song covers in her high school bedroom!) prepared her for the “TikTok Boom of 2020,” a subsequent job offer from BuzzFeed, and what to do when the algorithm steals the joy of performing and creating.

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- Alicia Menendez : Vanessa Sirias was part of what she has dubbed the TikTok boom of 2020. Since then, she has amassed a community of hundreds of thousands. She managed to do that after getting laid off during the pandemic and living with her mom before getting the opportunity to create for BuzzFeed. We talked about that big leap, the difference between creating for others and creating for yourself, and why even social media stars need social media breaks.
- Vanessa, thank you so much for being here.
- Vanessa Sirias: Thank you so much for inviting me.
- Menendez: Vanessa, you're born in Miami. You then move back to Nicaragua. You're there for five years. What do you remember about returning to the US?
- Sirias: It was such a different environment for me. I was raised by a single mom, so it came from being surrounded by a lot of family, to it just being me and her here in Miami against the world. There was a lot of economic challenges, so it was very different than my life back home, and learning a new language, going to school and not really understanding anything at all. So I remember that and slowly picking up the language and the school system here.
- Menendez: For those of us who follow you now who are members of your community, it's kind of shocking that you are a shy person and you were a shy kid. So I think of you in your room performing, and you weren't just performing for yourself. The original platform that you were exploring with was YouTube. What were you doing?
- Sirias: I started YouTube probably when I was in high school or starting off college, and I would make covers, like singing covers. It was just me in my room and my little keyboard, because I've always had a passion for singing. I think it was a great time for me to experience that and find my voice and really just do it for me.
- Menendez: Tell me more about that, about the idea of finding your voice. Because I think it is absolutely critical, and I think a lot of people expect that it just, of course, you're yourself. You're just yourself from the jump, when in reality, I think for a lot of stars it takes a certain curation and cultivation. So what didn't work? What were the

mistakes you were making in the YouTube phase, and what ultimately allowed you get to this place of alignment where you focused on culture?

Sirias: Yeah, I feel like in the beginning, during my early YouTube days, that was just a teenager in her room just experimenting. I didn't really know what to do, and I also felt like I wasn't being a hundred percent authentic to myself, because I would look at other creators and see what they would do to get views or to get discovered. And I would guess really adopt their style and not be true to mine, and that never works. After being in this industry for, I guess more than three years now, I find that authenticity is the best thing that you can do, and it's what audiences really crave.

I don't know, for me, it always came to I want to make a point, or there has to be a storyline, or there has to be something that I have to say. It's kind of like a battling thing, because audiences also crave to see your daily life. But for me it's always like, okay, I had an idea. It would be cool if I made this sketch, or if I made a song this way. I think it's just naturally the way I like to express myself the way I'm most comfortable. I have a background in theater and acting and music, so it was just what came naturally to me.

Menendez: Here's the thing I really want to dig in with you on Vanessa, which is you have made the leap that a lot of my mentees want to make, which is, classic story. First gen wants to get a real "serious job," wants to contribute in ways that feel material and obvious, but also has this real creative streak and wants to honor that as well. And when I go back and I look at your career trajectory, it looks like myself and it looks like so many of the women that I now mentor, because you end up in a news organization. You make your way through Telemundo, you make your way through Univision. What were the lessons you picked up in those newsrooms that you now get to apply to the work that you do?

Sirias: First, I have a background in journalism. I have a degree in communications and a minor in international relations, so I really enjoy talking about social problems. And you can even see it in my content sometimes, I bring up social issues that I go through, that Latinos go through in the US, and it's something that I've always been very passionate about. I think it was great for me to experience that, because I learned a lot about working in the corporate world, about working with other people in this very high stress newsroom, which is completely different than what I do. I think it taught me a lot of great skills on communicating with other people in a professional setting, dealing with corporations or dealing with brands, but it also taught me what I really wanted to do was not where I was at that moment.

Menendez: I have to imagine that you though, Vanessa, a lot of creators were living two professional lives in parallel at some point; that you were both going to your corporate job, doing what needed to be done, collecting that paycheck, and then also creating content on the side. Is that right?

Sirias: Yeah, yeah. But I feel like my, creating content for me actually came, I guess going head on into creating content is right after I got laid off. And it was kind of during a crazy time in Coronavirus. We didn't really know what was going on, a lot of

people were getting laid off, a lot of shows were getting canceled, and I happened to work on a show that did get canceled. And it was my first official job out of college, so I was kind of like, what is happening? What do I do now? We're in the middle of this pandemic that I've never lived through, but thankfully I had a lot of support from my mom and from my now husband. They both knew that I was wanting to create and wanting to make videos, and they had heard of TikTok and then they said, "You know what, why don't you give it a try?" And I did, and it was a lot of trial and error.

Menendez: What's the first thing that pops?

Sirias: I think it was Life of Karen, which is an old series I had, which was a parody of the Kardashians, but what if the Kardashians were full of Karens. It was at the time where a lot of "Karens" were out in the world and just a lot of people were going viral for being very mean and very negative to other people in just daily situations. So I made a parody out of it, and a lot of people loved it, and I ran with it. I have more than 10 episodes of Life of Karen, and that's where people really knew me in the beginning.

Menendez: Here's the thing that I struggle with as a social media user, which is on social media, whatever gets rewarded gets replicated. And so there is a push even for those of us who are not doing this professionally to be like, "Oh, everyone loves seeing pictures of my kids, more pictures of my kids. Everyone loves seeing my ice cream recommendations, more ice cream," which is cool if that feels-

Sirias: Authentic.

Menendez: To you, but if it feels like you're doing it because the algorithm told you it's what people want from you, it starts to really mess with your head. So I wonder how you resist that pull.

Sirias: I feel like I deal with that all the time. I feel like most creators probably do, because the algorithm is rewarding the same type of content, and if you are a creative, you want to express yourself in different ways. It's like an inner battle. But I feel like if it's not making me happy, I'm not happy with what I'm putting out, that at the end of the day is going to cost the quality of my content. And going back to being true to yourself, I think that's the one golden rule that we have to really respect is being true to yourself. If you push yourself to making content that you yourself are not happy with, the audience is going to see right through it.

Menendez: At what point does the opportunity to begin creating that type of content for other outlets start to emerge?

Sirias: In 2020, there was this crazy boom in TikTok. I reached I think a hundred thousand followers in probably less than six months, I feel like in 2020 there's a class of creators, we all came up together and we are all peers in this that went through the pandemic. Carlos Calderon, Alexis [inaudible 00:09:27], we all came up during that same time. And it was such a crazy boom. Overnight we would gain thousands of followers. It was crazy. For me personally, I think in less than a year of making content or about a year of making content, I was reached out by a

company that wanted to bring me to LA and to make content for them as a full-time employee, which I didn't even think about. And it was also at the time where in the beginning of content creation, you don't know how to make money, especially if you have never done this before or don't have peers in this industry that have done this before.

So I was like, okay, this is great, but I'm not making money. I still need to make money and provide for myself. And I got an email from BuzzFeed. They had seen my content, thank you to Maya Murillo, which she actually saw me on her for you page. Shout out to her, I wouldn't be here if it weren't for her, and she recommended me to the [inaudible 00:10:29] team. And they were looking for a new producer, and they reached out to me, and it was crazy. I remember crying when I got that email, because I was just so overwhelmed with problems and not knowing what to do, and that was just, it felt like a release, like okay, this is something I can do.

Menendez: I love this story so much in part because it really required you putting yourself out there. I think a lot of us are like, oh, I'll start writing when I get paid to be a writer. I'll start acting when I get paid to be an actor. And it's like, no, the work begins often before the paycheck begins, and that is really scary. But when you join an organization and you already have your own personal brand, for lack of a better term, your own vision, what were the conversations you had about what the dividing line was going to be between what was content for your employer and what was content for you?

Sirias: I feel like that is something that I've always had very clear from the beginning, because my brand or how I viewed myself online, I guess, is very different than how maybe a big corporation might see it. My audience, I know them very well. I know what they want, and it's like they're my group of friends, so I know what they would like to see. But when you're dealing with another company, it could be different. Their audience might be different, their goals might be different. So if there is a clear differentiator between the brands, I think it could be easier for the creator to see, okay, this type of video works for this, this type of video works for my personal platforms. So there's a lot of factors that go into that. T.

Thankfully in my workplace, there's a lot of freedom where I can make content for myself however I want. They don't really get into that. That's just, I am very fortunate in that way. I didn't explicitly say, this is my content and this is what I'm going to make for you. So I would just stick to accomplishing whatever goals they wanted me to reach, and then for myself, I have my own personal goals.

Menendez: And I want to talk about some of those goals and some of your expansion efforts in a second. But first I want to know, you recently took a social media break, which was fascinating to me from a social media star. What was the impetus? What was the driving force behind that break?

Sirias: Just mental health. I feel like when you are online as much as I am, it can really take a toll on your mental health. Also, a lot of personal challenges I was going through and just being online all the time was not helping me.

- Menendez: Can you give me a sense of what that looks like, though? I know you like me, struggle with anxiety and I think it is really hard to put yourself out there. My husband's always like, "Don't read your Twitter mentions, please. I don't want it to ruin your night." But for you, what did that actually look like?
- Sirias: Yeah, I mean, we are human. As much as I try to shield myself from the negativity, if you're just being, I guess, inundated by so much hate and so many hate comments, it's going to get to you, especially if you're reading them, which I shouldn't have done. That was mistake number one, reading the comments. And I think it is an addiction that a lot of us have, because a lot of us are just online all the time, and we don't see how much time we're wasting online. And for me, there's a big blur because I use it as entertainment, but I also work in it.
- So I think I have to be even more strict about it, and it is something I'm working on. It's very difficult to make that line and really make that differentiator between, okay, I'm working now and now it's downtime. But I just stopped making videos for a little bit because I was just making content that I was not passionate about. It was forcing myself into making these type of videos that I would think my audience would like, but it was never something that was coming from my heart, so I was just drained. I was burnt out, and it was just a moment where I needed to step back and be like, okay, I need to find myself again. I need to find the passion because it's not fun anymore, and I'm just getting really stressed about this, and that's not what it's about.
- Menendez: There is this evolution in the life of an influencer, which is, oh, you realize you can make some money because a company comes to you and they're like, "We want to pay you this much for a post." And then at some point you're like, wait a second. Why am I not selling or promoting my own stuff if I have this platform that is so valuable? Have you figured out what it is you really, really want to do with your platform and with your influence?
- Sirias: I'm really working towards that. I love representing Latinas. I love representing Nicaraguan Americans because it's something I never saw when I was little, so I make content for that little girl that was me, that never saw someone like me in the spotlight or someone like me anywhere in media, to be honest. In the long term, I would really love to act in bigger projects and sing in a bigger stage. I would love just to perform on and offline, if that makes sense.
- Menendez: To the point about not seeing women like yourself reflected back to in media when you were growing up, it strikes me, an interesting dynamic, we often talk about racial hierarchy within our community, bias and prejudice within our community. You have a mom who is much lighter-skinned than you are. You refer to her as a white Latina. And I wonder what the messages were that she was giving you at home about what it meant to be Latina, what it meant to be beautiful, what it meant to have self-worth, given that she didn't have the same lived experience that you would then grow up with.
- Sirias: Yeah. I think she really saw the impact of the American system within me when we moved here, because she never realized how much racism there was here in Florida, in Miami, and she saw it through me. Because she saw the way I was

getting bullied. She saw the way that I would come home and just cry, and tell her how I didn't like the skin color I lived with, or how I didn't like my facial features. So that must've been very difficult for her to hear from a five-year-old.

I remember she would always try to find representation in the media that I might relate to. Whenever we would watch Ms. Universe, who would always point out the darker-skinned girls. Or I remember sometimes, Ms. Venezuela, Ms. Colombia, Ms. Brazil, they would have the same type of skin color as I do, and she would point them out just so I can see a positive, beautiful representation of someone that kind of looked like me. I think if it weren't for her and her kind of pushing back on everything I was going through in school, it would've been a much more challenging way for me to love myself and love the skin I'm in. And the saddest part for me was that it was all coming from other Latinos and other ethnicities, and it was from the people I thought I would be accepted by.

Menendez: Got to get your mom on the podcast. She sounds like she was awesome. What did I miss Vanessa?

Sirias: I think the whole purpose of my brand is always to uplift Latinas, uplift Nicaraguan Americans, and show that we have so much more range than what traditional media has shown about us. That has always been my mission, whether it be through comedy, through music, or just me being who I am, I hope that my brand pushes towards a positive change in the way that we see Latinas.

Menendez: I love that as a North star. Vanessa, thank you so much.

Sirias: Thank you so much for having me.

Menendez: Thanks for listening. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our producer, Kojin Tashiro is our lead producer, Tren Lightburn mixed this episode. We love hearing from you. Email us at ola@latinatolatina.com, slide into our DMs on Instagram or on Threads and TikTok @latinatolatina. Check out our merchandise at latinatolatina.com/shop and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Goodpods, wherever you're listening right now. Every time you share this podcast, every time you leave a review, you help us to grow as a community.

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