

# Interview with Alessandra Gonzalez

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[00:00:00] **Madoris:** There we go. Oh, okay. So then the first thing is just basic information. Tell me a little about yourself, whatever you feel comfortable sharing about yourself—like your name, age, or where are you from?

[00:00:15] **Alessandra:** So my name is Laura Alessandra Gonzalez. I am an artist also known as Alessandra. I'm a salsa singer that migrated to Kingston about a decade ago due to escaping a violent relationship and just breaking away, you know, from that life and just starting anew.

And yeah—I just love this town because I was able to just really break away from that and start anew and just really focus on what I love, which is singing.

So, yeah.

[00:00:57] **Madoris:** Could you say just for [00:01:00]—I knowing already—but just for the recording, where are you from?

[00:01:03] **Alessandra:** So I'm from Trujillo Alto Puerto Rico. I was born in New York City in Mount Sinai, but I was raised in Puerto Rico 'till I was twenty. And then I moved back to New York and just kind of been bouncing around counties until I got here.

[00:01:22] **Madoris:** Did you move to New York—the city first and then you came here or how did that work?

[00:01:29] **Alessandra:** So I moved actually in Westchester County. I never liked the city because in Puerto Rico, it's—not that it's like city like, but it's very kind of like rural and islandeedy. So I found the city a little too overwhelming, culturally and just like all my daily life, I just couldn't, you know...

So I just didn't feel like I blended in that type. So I moved to Westchester where my [00:02:00] grandmother lived in Mohegan Lake, New York. And then I bounced to like Yonkers, but I kind of pretty much remained in the Westchester County area. And then I moved up here.

[00:02:14] **Madoris:** When did you move here? And what brought you here?

[00:02:16] **Alessandra:** I moved here in 2012 and I was working with a marketing firm and was in a very abusive relationship at the time. And, you know, it got to the point where it was more verbal abuse. But once it started like he started putting his hands on me—that was kind of like, you know, my limit. And I just didn't want that life.

So I just wanted to move as far away. I'm calling the domestic violence hotline, they kind of got me connected with this area. And at first I was like [00:03:00], “Oh my gosh, this is the middle of nowhere!” I mean—I know Westchester is pretty secluded compared to, you know, what everybody thinks of the city and everything, but...

It was a big shock for me, but it felt home interesting enough. And after a while, it was the time where the government shut down from the Obama administration. So I had to stay here longer because my case was being postponed because there was no detective, the government was shut down. They weren't doing any active investigations.

So to my safety, I had to stay hidden up here and it just grew. And I just loved the diversity and the culture here. And it's more laid back than it is, you know, down in the city or closer to the city. But most importantly [00:04:00], I just liked the rural areas and just all the help that was offered in this area for, you know, a person that struggling like myself at the time.

[00:04:13] **Madoris:** And you said it starts to feel like home. What made it feel like home? What was your first impression of the town? What did you think about it the first time you saw the town?

[00:04:24] **Alessandra:** Yeah, I [pause]—I'm a huge history buff. I love history for some reason. I love connecting with it and obviously Kingston being the first capital of New York has like tons of it. And I remember walking through the Trailways and just looking around and just walking through the Senate House and just like all those historical land points. And I was just like, wow, this is beautiful.

And then just connecting with other [00:05:00] people in the area. And I practice Buddhism. So I'm just finding out that there was such a huge community of Buddhists just right here in my backyard and I didn't have to drive all the way to Westchester to connect with them. So I feel like in a spiritual way it was big.

Also just the community, like I said, there's a variety of different Latinos, variety of different foods. So I was able to like just feel comfortable with that instead of just an all white area or all Hispanic area. I kind of feel more comfortable in a more diverse neighborhood because I don't know—it avoid segregation.

And I feel like when we're segregated, we're not thinking united. And you know those powers—those evil powers that be—are the ones that control that weak [00:06:00] and the segregated mentality. So I've always wanted really challenge, just really connecting with other cultures and other people. And I felt like Kingston was just the right place for that because there was like—you're Dominican and I'm Puerto Rican, you know? [Madoris laughs]

I work with a group called Yo Soy Latino and they're Peruvian—you know what I mean [laughs]? So it's just lovely to have so many different cultures and just really bond and connect. And because I sing salsa just to have that community support and - you know 'cause I've been seeing in festivals in town and stuff.

So just to have that support from fellow Latinos and just to feel like my art is appreciated that was also one of the many things that I really appreciate and just kind of kept me here, you know [laughs].

[00:06:58] **Madoris:** So are there any specific [00:07:00] organization that helped you find jobs or find like places to perform? Was there any for specific organization that helped you - or maybe like find housing even?

[00:07:12] **Alessandra:** So I know like in the beginning, Family of Woodstock really helped me with the sheltering and keeping me safe. So I'm really grateful for that. And uh the Center of Education- the C.E.C.—just really helped me a lot.

Not that I didn't have to hustle and just really be in the radar, you know? 'Cause that's another part of the artist is to really [pause] be out there—you know—and not be afraid, it's big step for me. But yeah I have just feel like the Family of Woodstock, the C.E.C. are just one of [00:08:00] many area—I mean like the library... When I first got here and just kinda like get acquainted with everything and.... I dunno, I feel like those three organizations the most... But for housing and stuff like that I've just really been a go-getter. I don't think that that was their strength at the time.

Maybe it was or there wasn't a lot of resources because of the government shutdown. But I didn't really... I wasn't able to get much services in that department, but they get services in just keeping me safe and just kind of starting anew 'cause starting from zero—and I was like twenty-five, twenty-six at the time. So that's hard with the toddler and no family support.

[00:08:59] **Madoris:** Yeah. [00:09:00] Have you faced any other challenges or barriers in Kingston—I know that was a big barrier. But anything else that you think that the town itself created a barrier?

[00:09:13] **Alessandra:** Um, I mean, you know, like I shared before, there is a little bit of segregation and the violence has been getting worse and worse throughout the years.

I don't really know what is causing it, but I feel like that's been one of my biggest barriers because—you know safety is a right that everyone should have. But at the same time, I feel like the more barriers your area gives you, the more it gives you to fight for what's right.

And you know, when they told me about recording my oral history, I was like well this is a way that I can really voice my experience [00:10:00] because it wasn't always nice, like I shared with Family Woodstock. They helped in some matters and other matters, you know, they kind of lacked in a way and I always kind of [pause]—that's another reason as an artist I really want to help eventually when I get there [laughs]. You know to a point where I could financially sustain and help the community, I really—that's one of the things I'm passionate about because one thing is creating music and another thing is creating my music and helping other people in the process.

Because art is designed to connect people. It's not designed to just be a job maybe people look at it that way—but I don't know. I feel like the reason I jumped into my artistry 'cause I was working a full-time job. So it was me just throwing myself out here in the universe.

But I feel like [00:11:00] yeah—it's just trying to make all of that happen and realize my dream to help others is like big for me, especially the youth in this area. They're struggling.

[00:11:14] **Madoris:** Um, was there anything that surprised you about Kingston when you got here or anything that was like shocking for you?

[00:11:23] **Alessandra:** I would say the amount of diversity because you really don't know until you venture out, you know, and then you venture out like, “Oh, wow. This is actually nice.” And the amount of activities that there are for just the people in the area free of charge, that really—you know, surprised me.

Because in a lot of areas—especially in Westchester area—you got to pay for a lot of events. There's not like a [00:12:00] lot of free events. So I think that was the most thing. Like I wasn't expecting that from Kingston, I guess [both laugh].

[00:12:10] **Madoris:** Okay. Um, now we're going to go into the questions more about your culture or whatever you call home.

You say you were Puerto Rican. So which traditions Puerto Rican traditions that you still try and incorporate into your life here in Kingston?

[00:12:30] **Alessandra:** Yeah, I would say salsa. Like I'm a salsa artist for a reason. I mean, don't get me wrong—I love my reggaeton. But salsa is so universal and I feel like it connects me to Puerto Rico. And I do want to—I aspire to go back, you know. Right now, it's quite of a challenge with the political situation, COVID, financially, you know.

I feel like I'm more [00:13:00] stuck here, but I feel like that is a opportunity for me to just really connect with people. And I feel like singing salsa and just really just putting it out there and putting my art—my cultural art—which is being a salsa singer. It just... People can feel it, you know, and they love it and they dance it.

They enjoy it. And I'm all for it [laughs].

[00:13:29] **Madoris:** We love salsa. Let me tell you [laughs].

[00:13:31] **Alessandra:** Yeah. Great.

[00:13:33] **Madoris:** Any other like traditions that you have kept, like—I dunno—that'd be like a holiday or a special thing from Puerto Rico that you like to keep coming here?

[00:13:44] **Alessandra:** Yeah. I mean I feel like most of the things that connect me is music, but one thing I really am trying to—is to learn how to dance our folkloric [00:14:00] music - Jibaro Plena [SP] - because there's a lot of history there.

But yeah dance—corporal movement—is one of the things that I really want to aspire to bring more. And I tried to do it at home, but I don't really bring it out because not a lot of people know. Also, you know—like the holiday, you're cooking and you're putting the music and just the hospitality and just the energy as if I was in Puerto Rico, I feel like it's so needed to really stand out in your culture [laughs].

[00:14:39] **Madoris:** Have you given up any?

[00:14:43] **Alessandra:** [Sigh] Yeah uh—not by choice. I would say mostly my diet because I got really sick with meat. So I can't eat like a lot of typical foods

that I would [laugh] [unclear] eat [00:15:00]. The language. It's a little hard to speak it fluidly when nobody speaks Spanish, right? Um [pause], and just obviously the way I dress because it's forty degrees outside [Madoris laughs]. You can't be wearing spaghetti shirts and low risers all the time.

[00:15:30] **Madoris:** ...[laughing hard] the shorts.

[00:15:31] **Alessandra:** And the shorts, you know – like. That is definitely something you have set.... The flip-flops—tell me about them flip-flops yeah.

[00:15:41] **Madoris:** Yeah, I was sandals team all the way.

[00:15:44] **Alessandra:** Yes, you know. Well, the beach trips—I have to travel two hours away (I go to Belmar), but you know.... The beach, you know, that [pause] just.... Just being more in tune with my culture.

When [00:16:00] you're over there, you're watching the news, you're like just in the air, in the atmosphere. So just keeping it consistent and connected. I feel like [pause]—yeah, that's like.... I'm slowly losing it, but I'm visiting a lot more lately. So I'm holding on to dear life [laughs].

[00:16:21] **Madoris:** Is there any food from your homeland—I know you were talking about food—that is important to you?

[00:16:26] **Alessandra:** Mmm, girl... [Madoris laughs] I would say what food isn't important, so bacalaitos—things that I can eat. Let me just stick with things that I can eat. Um, bacalaitos, which is like some fried food and alcapurrias de jueyes (jueyes is like a blue crab). And oh it's delicious! And the—you know they do their magic and put it in alcapurrias which is another fried food [both laughs]. Um... Mofongo [laughs hard].

[00:17:00] **Madoris:** Oooohhh yes. Did you ever have mofongo here?

[00:17:04] **Alessandra:** Yes [laughing]—I love my mofongo con caldo camarones, big, big.... But that—although I can't eat it anymore, but I do use the love my Pollo Guisado. I actually made it for a fundraiser event the other day and it was the hit of the party. And I was like, man, I wish I could eat that chicken. And it looks so good [laughs hard].

Yeah. Los platanutres because usually I can eat that. There is a dessert it's called Arañita de coco, which is...

[00:17:37] **Madoris:** Yep.

[00:17:38] **Alessandra:** You know [laughs]. So yeah just stuff like that I miss because it's just so good. But it's not good for me. So maybe that's good for the diet, right?

[00:17:48] **Madoris:** Yep.

[00:17:49] **Alessandra:** Well, I'll just keep lying to myself.

[00:17:51] **Madoris:** [laughs hard] Los besitos?

[00:17:53] **Alessandra:** Ay los besitos de... [speaking in Spanish] y tienen unos de guayaba.

[00:17:55] **Madoris:** [laughing hard gasp] Yeah, oh... [drops microphone] Oh my gosh. [00:18:00] Hopefully, it's still there [both laugh hard].

[00:18:03] **Alessandra:** See see—we can't talk about it, we get too excited [Madoris laughing]. Yeah tienen unos quesitos de... de queso y guayaba.

[00:18:18] **Madoris:** I have an aunt that—well, she's not my aunt she's my mom's best friend and my dad's cousin's wife. But she's Puerto Rican and she will bring us to DR quesitos everytime she would go. So I'm in love them.

[00:18:34] **Alessandra:** That and pastelillos de guayaba which is also really good. I mean, what isn't the best? El flan, tres leches... I could just go there for hours because I just—I love food.

I didn't even know how I managed to lose this much weight, but you know [pause]. Maybe it's because they're not as accessible to me [laughs].

Okay [00:19:00]. So on a natural side, I definitely miss la guanabana, la parcha, la acerola, la guayaba, las quenepas, tamarindos, todo eso los mangos.



Literalmente, caminas por ahí cojes un mango y te lo comes y ya. Los aguacates que son del tamaño de tu cara. Mi pai' me mandó una foto disque 'mija, chequeate' literalmente así de grande. Y que los aguacates de aquí no son lo mismo son de agua, son más like pasty and rich in that way. But [whispers] so good. Ah y los cocos fríos cuando regresas de la playa...

[00:19:48] **Madoris:** Y tienen tu coco ahí en la calle.

[00:19:55] **Alessandra:** Actually, there's two big things that I would, even when I was trying to go [00:20:00] to Puerto Rico, but they have the thing, this thing called Mabí.

[00:20:04] **Madoris:** Oh! [Alessandra laughs] I know.

[00:20:07] **Alessandra:** And it's - I think it's fermented tamarindo, I'm not sure. But I miss mabí and I miss just like just pulling out – buying a bag of china (naranja) that used to be like a potato sack this big, and you would like have fresh O.J. at your house and you buy this – like a hundred oranges for like five bucks tops. And we would just have jugo de china for days, you know, y comprando un ramo de caña and just cutting it and bite into it—you're good for days.

[00:20:43] **Madoris:** You're giving me—you're giving me home right now [both laugh].

[00:20:45] **Alessandra:** And they used to make a drink with the caña. I don't remember what it's called, but yeah, those are—I know I said a lot, man. Yeah. Good thing we got this because you would have been like, “And what else...” Carne frita, Marisco, I mean girl let me stop...So good.

[00:21:08] **Madoris:** Okay. Um are there any American traditions that you have embraced?

[00:21:10] **Alessandra:** Yeah totally. I feel like just being in America, it's just a whole other culture in itself because you're integrating different cultures. And I just feel like.... It's the holidays - like Martin Luther King Day. We don't celebrate that that much in our country or—all these like nonchalant holidays that we just don't celebrate in Puerto Rico.

I mean, we [pause]. They say in Puerto Rico that we have more days off. You know días feriados que muchas partes del mundo, so de seguro, si lo practicaba yo ni me daba de cuenta porque lo veía como feriado.

But, I feel like the one that mostly stand out was the Martin Luther King for me because of.... So in Puerto Rico, we don't look at like, oh, blacks and whites and Asian, you know. It's more of a cultural discrimination. Or social discrimination more than anything, like where's your family, what's your reputation that way.

And I'm sure you can relate. So here to kind of experience the [pause]—just the mistreatment that really you don't see in our country. So it's really celebrating African-Americans because it's part of my culture and just embracing them. It's been something that I've adopted. And just being able to just venture out in other cultures, like Jewish culture. Like you know - when they celebrate [00:23:00] Ramadan and all that it sounds—like oh this is all crazy to just know that these things are going out there.

So just to be open for anything, but not really taken the culture, but just embracing it. So that they don't feel like I don't care or something [laughs].

[00:23:22] **Madoris:** What's next, um... What part of your culture would you like others to embrace?

[00:23:30] **Alessandra:** Yeah, definitely—like I said la salsa all day. I feel like salsa umm [pause]—to be able to be more heard in our community will bring more Latinos together.

Because even though Latinos have their own different folkloric music, they can always like connect to salsa. So that and also to really integrate our folkloric [00:24:00] dance, which is la bomba y la plena. So just really to have more Boricuas to really know their roots—their taíno roots and how we broke away from slavery and, you know. Those dances mean so much to just have them just celebrate them in Puerto Rico—there's Puerto Ricans everywhere and our culture has so much pain, but at the same time it has so much beauty and it's brought so much music and culture to the world.

So just say just a little bit more of the hard side. I feel like everybody's like, “Oh, Puerto Ricans got it good.” But ehh.... Maybe we have a good in the surface,

but deep down—we fought a lot. We still fighting, you know, and I feel like our music really represents that valiant struggle that we've endured over the centuries.

[00:25:00] **Madoris:** Um-huh. How welcoming do you think Kingston is?

[00:25:03] **Alessandra:** Very—I think very welcome. That's the reason I stayed, you know, because I feel like they weren't opposed to [pause] - just taking me in wherever I was at. Whether if it's just having a day job and just work—or as an artist. I feel like they embrace me more as an artist because it's something that it's just not [pause]—there's not a lot of Latino artists in the area.

I really do what I do. So I feel like I've had a lot more love and embracement because I've been so passionate to bring that culture in the forefront in this area so people could enjoy and I'm just riding the wave, you know [laughs].

[00:25:55] **Madoris:** Do you have any favorite story about being an immigrant in Kingston? Just like [00:26:00] in general, what's kind of like, it could be a good experience or an experience that marks yours or anything like that?

[00:26:09] **Alessandra:** Yeah umm [long pause]. Like in Kingston per se?

[00:26:15] **Madoris:** Just about being an immigrant in this location.

[00:26:15] **Alessandra:** Okay. Um. Well [pause], yeah—it's definitely... Even though there's a lot of resources for us immigrants—although I don't even know how I even... I don't even know how I feel about being an immigrant because I am Puerto Rican, which is part of the United States.

But... Yeah, it's just such a complex and it depends on the perspective, I guess, but I just feel like in a cultural aspect, being that that's not everybody's culture here, I feel like the most marked experience is to be able to perform and just how people just really receive [pause] my art. And or my struggle or whatever, you know. I just, these five years have been really developing myself as an artist and being that I'm not from here and I'm just sharing a little piece of Puerto Rico.

I feel like that memory will always stay because—sometimes we could be in our own country and our own backyard and the first ones to ignore you, you know? And I feel like what really marked me to even just continue on the battle is just the fact that I've—even though the opportunity was it like smooth sailing, but the opportunity was there for me to seize it.

So I think that's what [00:28:00] I can always treasure as an immigrant. Just being able to come here and not it all be lost, you know? And just struggle somewhere else. I mean, yes—I'm struggling, but at least I'm doing what I love and the fact that it's being well received. I feel like I'm making history in this area in a way that no one's really done yet. And that's pretty cool [laughs].

I'm digging it. I'm digging it. It's scary though, but the response and just the constant feedback of welcoming, it just keeps fresh. So I feel like if there's any experience, it's just the support that Kingston always comes with the open arms and just the people willing to just be there to help each other, which—in New York, [00:29:00] everybody thinks of New Yorkers.... That were not like that.

So it's pretty cool. Yeah.

[00:29:06] **Madoris:** And then the last question is what ways has migration changed your sense of identity?

[00:29:17] **Alessandra:** I wouldn't say it changed it, but I would say it improved it because it helped me be more open to other cultures. So I feel like that's—that's for having that. That and just [long pause]. Well, I'm not home, you know? I'm not in Puerto Rico.

So I just feel like between the people and everything it kind of [long pause] guess it kind of like blends in, you know? So...

[00:29:56] **Madoris:** Yeah. Is there anything else that you would like for us to have [00:30:] in your oral history or anything?

[00:30:03] **Alessandra:** Yeah, I mean I feel like being that [pause] I'm a domestic violence survivor. I just feel like a lot of people look at artists like, “Oh you know, so-and-so helped. And you know, their parents helped.” And there

are times where we can be in a very life or death situations where we're not going to have any help or resources that we can see, but [pause]

Just I really want women to know that even if they feel deadlocked that—if they are in that situation, they can get out of it, that it's not a dead end. That if they have hope and they really have an open heart to really let others help—even though it's not their comfort, circle of friends or family that they really do [00:31:00] just for the sake of their own wellbeing.

And it's never too late to do what you love. So even though it was a whole decade with not singing because of fear and all these other negative things in my heart. Um [pause], you know, when I actually did it, it was very empowering. And I'm sure there's nurses, there's all kinds of professions, you know, but if a man or a woman going through any abusive situation to really fight for your life. And yeah—this area has amazing resources. So you can fight for your life and wonderful people that can really help you with that.

[00:31:44] **Madoris:** Thank you so much.

End: 31:47