

On connecting with a spiritual self



Singer-songwriter Angélica Garcia discusses dealing with her inner critic, honoring the subcultures, and taking care of her body while on tour.

March 4, 2025 -

As told to Miriam Garcia, 2301 words.

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You are from Los Angeles but lived for a few years in Richmond, Virginia. Each city has its own creative vibe. How did these cities influence your creative practice?

My favorite thing about Richmond is that it's a city, right? But it still felt small enough to have a community. And because there wasn't as much of an industry presence as you might find in LA or New York, I found that it was super supportive for just trying things without worrying about what other people were going to think of it. In Richmond, I was in five bands. I was in a psychedelic surf rock band, I was in a kind of Americana-y trio, and I was in a rock-and-roll band. I just got to try all this stuff and all these different bars and venues. You could just book a gig, no problem. It was cool. It was a great place to learn how to be a working musician.

You have released albums with both major and independent labels. What are you looking for in how you release your work and collaborate with that part of the industry?

When I release music, I'm just looking for people who understand what I'm trying to do. I've been surprised by who steps up to support it. Sometimes, it's not who I think it will be. I just like to go wherever people get it and respect it. I think my passion as a storyteller is kind of going through the subcultures of the places that raised me and almost doing a snapshot... My brain thinks like a collage. So any time I live somewhere or stay somewhere for a while, I collect these talismans of these places. That's why I love doing collage art. It's like, you keep a little souvenir of the place and then you use that to make a collage to tell a greater story.

Barack Obama chose your song "Jícama" as one of his favorites of 2019. What do you think makes that song so special?

I think the coolest thing about "Jícama" is that it's just really in your face. It's just right on the nose. And, we're in it again, right? We're literally here again. But at that time, there were so many ICE raids and shit going on in the states super violent towards immigrants. "I see you, but you don't see me" is just pretty straight to the point. I listen back to "Jícama" and I'm really proud of my baby self who's like, "Yeah, I'm right here."

And I won't say all of the US is like this, but in the parts of the US that have animosity towards these subcultures, it literally makes no sense. Because a lot of the time, the things that people love the most about cities come from these subcultures. Whether it's Mexicano, Chicano culture, or whether it's gay culture. Whether you realize it or not, the stuff that makes it pop off comes from this. So, I hope that's what [Obama] saw.

Your latest album is titled GemeLo, which means "twin" in Spanish. Where were you in your life when you were

creating it?

To be honest, it was a really challenging part of my life. I just noticed that I was very *in my body*. I felt super in my head—confused, kind of numb—because of all the things that were going on in my personal life. And I noticed a separation in myself, and it was so extreme. It was during the pandemic as well. It was so extreme that I was trying to meditate. I was making an altar in my room and trying to learn the names of all my past family members, searching for guidance. Sometimes it felt like my spirits would kind of throw water on me and try to wake me up, like, “Angélica.” The concept of Gemelo came out of that because I felt like I had my body on this earth, that was just physically tired. But then I had a spirit self, an intuitive self, whispering to me, trying to get me to wake up, trying to get me to observe things and notice things, so that I could heal myself properly. So, that was the *gemelo* that saved me.

That’s a great way to explain the duality of how both have to work together and align.

We can get so caught up in everyday life that it can become monotonous and numbing. But I think it’s important to remember your spirit and your soul, which are part of your body, because that’s what propels you through.

Another thing about this album is that it’s mostly in Spanish. You’ve mentioned that some people questioned that decision, or commented on how you pronounce the lyrics and your grammar. How were you able to move away from all those external voices?

I think I just realized I had to shut up and do it. If you don’t do something because you’re scared of doing it, that’s not a good reason. I honestly even had a lot of family telling me, “I know that your *español* is really bad, don’t do it.” And then I just realized, “I’m trying and I’m going to get better. But if I don’t start now, I’m going to stay bad.” I think one of the problems about growing up in the States is, it’s almost like the whole system is designed to separate you from your culture so that you can become this robot in the system that just prioritizes industry, capitalism, and isolation.

We’re meant as humans to live in community and to understand where we’re from, and that knowledge is so grounding and powerful. Nobody can take that away from me. I need to understand that. And I might mess up sometimes. But, it was really important to me, even for speaking with my family. When I showed them my album Cha Cha Palace, I realized my grandma doesn’t even understand it because it’s in English. So, that right there is half of the people I love in my life, because I’m not singing in Spanish. So I should just try.

When you started performing live, your shows were mostly you with a sampler. But then for your new album, I was pretty amazed by all the energy and the dancing that you do. How did dancing become a bigger thing in your performances?

I’m not a dancer, but I love dancing. *Gemelo* sits between all these genres and I understand it’s not the most intuitive thing to dance to. So I felt like I needed to show how I would dance to it or show at least how I would move to it. I’ve always loved theatrical musicians, and I just saw it as a perfect opportunity to embody that.

You have mentioned that the lyrics for your song “Juanita” came to you suddenly and you wrote them in just a few minutes. Does that happen often? What’s your writing process?

I won’t say it happens often, but it’s pretty freaking magical when it does. That song in particular, because I didn’t speak Spanish that well at that time... then I realized that I had multiple great-grandmothers named Juanita and I was like, “Oh, they wanted a song, that’s why.” It was like a channel. Some songs take months, some take years sometimes to finish. And there are ones [where] the channel is open and it just pours through you.

What do you think facilitates the process of channeling that kind of creative energy?

I think the biggest thing is acceptance. And telling myself basically to shut up. I can be my worst critic. I over-intellectualize... “What are these people going to think of this? What is my record label going to think? What

are the producers going to think? What is my mom going to think of this?" All the weird little things that we do to trick ourselves into overthinking the actual thing.

You just have to be in a state of acceptance and allowance, allowing it to flow through you, which is way harder to do than you would think. That's why I like very meditative things like dance or yoga.

You have been releasing music for almost a decade. Is there a particular practice or ritual that keeps you grounded and creatively curious?

When I really get alone time. And what I mean by that is mentally alone, if that makes sense. What I was saying earlier about all those intrusive thoughts: when I just allow myself to trust myself, that's when I explore more, and the exploration is a part of that flow state. If I'm too worried about how I look to other people, or how I sound to other people, it kills it. There's something so sacred about wandering and allowing your body, your mind, and your spirit to encounter things. I think building in that time is so crucial to figuring out who you are, what you like, what you don't like, what inspires you, what terrifies you, what makes you weep, what makes you full of joy. Understanding all those emotions, so that you can then communicate them later.

You have been touring on your own, with your music, of course, but also worldwide with bands like Mitski, IDLES, Nilüfer Yanya. How do you manage to take care of yourself with all these changing schedules and showing up with different audiences?

Okay, number one: make sure you have bomb friends. Make sure that the tribe is very special because your body goes through it and your mind goes through it. It's extreme. It's like, you wake up at four in the morning to take the two-hour bus to then go to the one-hour rehearsal, and then you go into the show. Maybe you got to eat, maybe you didn't. Then maybe your shoe breaks on the way to the thing. All of these random things that happen to you. You're carrying the cases that are 60 pounds each. So, having your tribe really be there to listen to you, to comfort you, is so essential.

Make sure that you treat your body kindly. Don't just be drinking every night. And I like to have a little moment to myself, too, to ground spiritually. That looks different in different situations, but before every show, whoever I'm playing with, we always take a little moment to give thanks for, first of all, the chance to even get to do this and be here. And then maybe just do a little energy, like holding each other's hands and making sure that we're in the same place mentally. Because once it starts, you just go. You feel like an athlete or something. Once you get on stage, whatever happens is kind of beyond you. "Oh, the microphone's feeding back. Oh, the drum fell over." You just have to pick it up and allow it to be a show anyway; you have to move through it. I don't remember my shows that much, because it's like I'm not there.

Your mother is a singer, of ranchera and mariachi music. Is there particular advice that she has given you or any wisdom that you took from her growing up?

She gave me the best lesson probably in my entire life. She never taught me music theory or stuff like that; I would just sing and then she would correct me. I'd be in the middle of the song and she would stop me and say, "No, stop. Do it again." And I'd be like, "What?" She'd reply, "Do it again." I was like, "What are you talking about? I sang all the notes right, the lyrics were right, what are you talking about?" She would say, "Nope, do it again. I don't believe you." I think that was the best lesson: *I don't believe you*. The whole idea of, if you're not doing something from your heart, what are you doing it for? As a singer, you have to tap into these very visceral emotions, whatever their extremes are. And the healing comes from connecting back to that place and showing it to people.

Angélica Garcia recommends:

Listen to what your body is telling you. If your body is extremely tired, if you feel like your brain is giving you feedback or ugly noises when you're around a certain person or a certain place, listen to your body. Your body is wise, even though it doesn't literally talk to you.

My friend Dave said this to me, and whether you believe it or not, it is true: if you believe that you're going

to do something, you're going to do it. If you believe you're not going to do something, you're never going to do it.

It's never too much to show up and be exactly who you want to be. Who cares if it scares people or whatever.

On the industry side, nobody's going to give a fuck about anything if you don't give a fuck about it. You've got to be the one leading and driving the machine to actually execute your vision.

There's divinity in everything. You can transform the grief, the rage, the fear into your own power. Instead of being held back by negative things and fears, if you instead accept it as an opportunity to be challenged by the source and to connect deeply to it, in order to make a new thing—then you can make a new thing. Because, going back to point two, whatever you believe is true, is true.

Name

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Vocation

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Carlos Garcia