



How Gina Brillon Became a Comedy Junkie

“I was a comedy junkie at 14,” she admits. And now Gina Brillon is a rising comedy star, headlining tours with the likes of Gabriel Iglesias, premiering an HBO Latino special, “Easily Offended,” and hosting a comedy showcase. Gina tells us how comedy helped her process a toxic relationship, and how her #MeToo moments forced her to choose between her career and her dignity.

Alicia Menendez:

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Comedian Gina Brillon is over people being offended by everything, so much so, her new HBO Latino Comedy Special, *Easily Offended*, may offend some people. In our conversation, Gina floored me with her honesty about everything from how comedy helped her process a toxic relationship to how she feels her Me Too moments forced her to choose between her career and her dignity.

Gina, thanks for coming in.

Gina Brillon: Thanks for having me.

Menendez: Showing up early, nonetheless.

Brillon: I am so early. The false stereotype about Latinas being late.

Menendez: You have been doing standup since you were 17 years old.

Brillon: Yes.

Menendez: Tell me about the very first time you got on stage and gave this a try.

Brillon: So, it was the day of my high school graduation. Shout out to Lehman High School in the Bronx. It was the day of my high school graduation and my mom had entered me and my twin sister in a contest called Funniest Person from the Bronx. I was at Stand Up New York, one of my home clubs, here in New York.

Menendez: Wait, your mom just did that for you?

Brillon: Yeah, she did. You have to understand, I fell in love with comedy at 14 and my parents knew it. I was a comedy junkie at 14 and my parents-

Menendez: What did it look like to be a comedy junkie?

Brillon: I would watch anything stand up comedy related.

Menendez: Who were your faves?

Brillon: It's going to sound crazy, because I was such a comedy nerd. I loved, well, first and foremost, Brett Butler. She was the first comic I saw on stage—her showtime special—and I just fell in love with standup comedy. I'd never seen a woman on stage commanding the attention of an entire theater full of people. She wasn't scantily clad, she wasn't a dancer, she wasn't a singer, she was just up there talking. It was the most brilliant and amazing thing I'd ever seen. I had never seen a woman just talking and being brilliant.

So, the first time I saw that, I was like, "What is ... This woman's funny and smart, and she's still pretty." There was still beauty and everything, and it just immediately hit, and I became obsessed and I watched everything of hers. Brett Butler, George Burns, George Carlin, and the list just kept going on and on and on and on until I discovered Lily Tomlin, Margaret Cho, all these other amazing performers. I would just soak it up and I watched all that I could. Every sitcom that was based on a standup comedian's life, I watched.

Menendez: But you and I grew up in a sort of pre-Internet. The Internet was coming in our early teens, so where were you watching? Were you taking them at the library?

Brillon: Cable. Cable. Cable.

Menendez: Oh, fancy, Gina.

Brillon: Well, the cable my parents stole? No, I don't know if they stole it. They probably did. I watched it a lot of ... which is why I've done some projects with HBO and I'm working on one now with them. It's why it's such a big deal when I work with certain networks, because I used to watch comedians on HBO. I was constantly watching TV.

I was constantly trying to—There was a show, I can't remember if it was Telemundo Univisión that used to have Risas y Más Risas and Qué Loco, were two Spanish—they were on Spanish channels, but they were English. There were English programs on Spanish channels where they would do standup comedy. I just remember when I watched

that, I was like, "Oh my God." I saw people like George Lopez. I saw Greg Giraldo. I saw these comics and I was just... my eyes widened and I was like ... because now I've seen a woman and I've seen Latinos do stand up and I'm both. So I was like, "I'm like a hybrid mix of these. I could totally do this." As a kid, I knew immediately that's what I was going to do.

Menendez: Because you were a jokester at school, at the kitchen table?

Brillon: I wasn't even a jokester so much as I couldn't stand seeing people upset. So, whenever somebody was upset or sad, I would do anything to make them laugh. Whether it was my parents or my grandmother or a friend, I would do anything to make that laugh. I think that feeling becomes addictive, that feeling of making someone else feel good just became this addiction of like, "Oh my goodness, I'm making somebody laugh. I'm making them feel better." I just became obsessed with it.

Menendez: So, mom signs you up.

Brillon: Mom signed me up.

Menendez: And she throws your twin in, too.

Brillon: She throws my twin in, because my twin and I, we were inseparable. She enters us. I was nervous. I was so nervous. Actually, no, wait. The first time I got on stage, I think I was in shock, so I wasn't nervous. I went up on stage. I did five minutes. Me and my sister both won third place.

Brillon: I always tell myself it's because they couldn't tell the difference. I'm like, "Clearly I was meant for this. They just couldn't tell the difference between us." My sister is very funny, but we have very opposite side of the spectrum, just senses of humor. She's very dark and sarcastic and I'm very playful. It was interesting going through that, but she didn't do comedy for very long. She's a personal trainer now and she's amazing, but comedy, I just knew the second I stepped off that stage after that first show, I was like, "I'm never stopping this."

Menendez: Were you good, though?

Brillon: Probably not. I guarantee you in the beginning we all suck, because I think your goals change as a comic. In the beginning, the most important thing is getting a laugh. That first laugh, getting any laugh, and continuously getting laughs is so important when you first start, and it should be. It should be your goal just to make people laugh. Then, the more graduated you become, the next level that you hit, it's always like, "Well, what do I want to say? Now that I'm making people laugh, what do I want to say?" Then, from there, you just kind of grow and grow and grow, once you figure out what you want to say and what you want to talk about.

Menendez: What did it take to get better?

Brillon: Lots and lots of stage time, which is why I drill that into people when I meet new comics and they ask me like, "Hey, what advice would you give me?" The first thing I say is "Stage time." It is the most—That stage has to become ... not even your second home. It has to become your home. You have to get up on that stage and feel so comfortable that whether a show goes good or it goes bad, you've just walked into your home. That's a concept that you can't really understand until you've logged in so many hours. It's that 10,000 hours theory. The more you log in, the more comfortable you get onstage, the more control you have of a room of people. You all have this one same goal, which is to have fun. Now, once you get them in there and once you master the art of being onstage, that just changes the game so much.

Menendez: Pull back the curtain for me on the business of this whole thing.

Brillon: Okay.

Menendez: How does a standup comedian get paid?

Brillon: There's no one path to getting paid. There are several different avenues that you should examine for getting paid. When I started, the only one... I mean, when I *started* started, when I was really struggling to get spots or fighting for my spots in the city, I would get paid because I would hand out flyers and on the back of the flyer were my initials, and if I got five people in, I got \$5. My roots began with a lot of me just feet to the freaking pavement and just really busting my hump to get out there and do whatever I had to do. After that, I got my first TV credit, and then that became easier to get paid.

Menendez: Wait, what does that mean?

Brillon: I booked a commercial for Comedy Central. When I started, and probably still now, I think it still holds true in the industry, when you book your first TV credit, it's like you level up. It's like people go, "Oh, well she had a TV credit now, so now she's leveled up. Now I got to pay her and now I got to put her in a better spot in the lineup on the show." So, once you get your first TV credit, you get a little more confidence to start asking for a little bit more, like, "Hey, can I work the shows on the weekend instead of just doing the weekday shows?" Stuff like that. Then, you get your second credit and you keep leveling up. The more that you have on your belt, the more you level up.

Menendez: So, when do you get paid in the way that allows you to not have a side hustle?

Brillon: Well, I mean, the more you bust your hump at this ... It's not a matter of like, "Okay, at this point." It's: how hard are you willing to work? Because you can get paid, but you got to work the road a lot. You can get paid, but you got to get passed at the clubs.

Menendez: So, talk to me about how the road works.

Brillon: It's a crazy life. I'm on the road a lot, particularly now, and I was just on tour with Gabriel and that was insane. When you're touring with somebody who's a massive star like he is,

you're doing arenas, and it's just unbelievable. Most of the time, though, when you book a road gig, you're going to be performing in a little town where there's nothing else to do but this particular comedy show that night, so you feel like a rock star because they treat you like you are the most important person in the world. Wherever you go in that town, you are a celebrity.

Then, you have the opposite side of it, which is you're going to have those gigs where like four people show up, where you're headlining on the road and you don't have much of a crowd. It's a rough, rough life, because you don't know which way the pendulum is going to swing. Is it going to be incredible tonight or is it going to be garbage? You don't know, and that's the chance you take as a comic. That's the scary part. When people talk about standup comedy being scary, it's you can't predict the outcome.

Menendez: How did you meet him? Did you have to persuade him to mentor you or was that a mantle he just took on?

Brillon: It's sort of a natural thing for him. He's a very giving person with his time, with his knowledge and was very open for me to ask questions. He was always like, "If you have questions, you can ask me." He's very good at guiding people-

Menendez: Because you're in a very opaque business.

Brillon: Yes. Being a female in this business, also, you don't find ... There are good men out there in this business. I will never trash the men in comedy. However, at the time when I started, I was usually the only female and the youngest female and there were a lot of dirt bags, but I'm so thankful for the big brothers in comedy that I had. Guys like Gabriel were big brothers.

Menendez: Talk to me about the dirt bags, though, because a lot of them are, in this moment, being exposed.

Brillon: Yes.

Menendez: More importantly, the culture and the power of these institutions are being exposed. We've watched what's happened with Louis C.K. What was your experience of navigating that, especially when you were young?

Brillon: I was always a street smart kid, thank God. If I ever got a weird vibe, I was usually the first to opt out of a situation, to be like, "I don't feel safe," and leaving. But even with that, I still got caught up. There were a couple of instances of sexual harassment. A lot of it happened, which is why I empathize with people. It takes a lot to come out and say, "This happened to me and it's affected me my whole life." I took what happened to me and I guess in a weird way I've always been psychologically sound enough to look at a situation as removed from it emotionally as I can, and I've always looked at those situations and went, "That happened to me, and it enables me to empathize with other women who have been through it." So, I am thankful that I can empathize with other women.

Menendez: Is it psychologically sound or is it a way of compartmentalizing trauma?

Brillon: It depends on how you look at it. I look at it as: I am able, almost in a stoic way, to look at a situation, remove the emotion and go, "This happened to me, but it doesn't have to define me. I define me. By my definition, I am strong, I am unrelenting, I am determined." I don't look at it as this fully negative experience, because everything in life, it depends on your point of view.

Menendez: I see that and I also still see though how you are in a system, and a lot of young women comedians were in a system, where if you identified the problem, you would then become the problem and the potential professional risk to you of calling things out. In the moment, what I'm understanding you say is your assessment was, "The risk is too great to say something in real time."

Brillon: Actually, no, in real time I would speak up. In that moment, I would speak up because I was the kind of person that was like, "I will punch you in your face, dude." Literally have said that to so many dudes. Or I'm like, "I will punch you if you make me feel uncomfortable in any way."

Menendez: But did you then feel like you could go to a touring manager and say this is behavior and it's happening?

Brillon: Oh yeah. Without a doubt. It's a conscious decision I made, because I looked at it and I said, "Well, let's say worst case scenario, this ruins my career. Now I have a choice to make between my career and my dignity. Well, what am I going to want for the rest of my life? My dignity. If I have to sling pancakes, but I kept my dignity, then that's fine by me. It's just a decision I was able to make because I looked at it like, I'd rather speak up and have this possibly detriment me than not say anything.

Brillon: Part of that is how I was raised. I was raised with a lot of strong Latin women. I mean, fiercely strong. I have an aunt whose breakfast is a Pepsi and a cigarette. These are women you do not mess with. These were strong women, women that went through so much trauma and still were able to come out on top because they fought through it. Having those women as examples as a young girl gave me the backbone that I needed.

Menendez: Do you ever see any of those men now, out on tour?

Brillon: No. Here's the thing about a lot of the dirt bags I dealt with, and this is just the guys I dealt with, they never were successful. They burned their own bridges. They screwed up with too many people. There are people that stayed successfully under the radar with their creepiness and now that it's brought to light, everybody's like, "Woe is me. Woe is me. Men are scared." You should be scared. You should be as scared as a woman is when she's walking down the street and she sees a group of men. That's how scared you should be. Sorry, dudes. Welcome to our world. I love the weeping of, "The men are so frightened." Good. You should be. You should be aware of it. That's not even me being a douche bag to dudes. I grew up a tomboy. I love all my homeboys, but there is a level of,

you guys ignored this for so long. So, now that it's come to light, please don't cry about how unsafe you feel, because we've been unsafe.

Menendez: You're Puerto Rican.

Brillon: Yes.

Menendez: Grew up in the Bronx.

Brillon: Absolutely.

Menendez: What of that have you used as a material?

Brillon: A lot of it. It influences my point of view a lot. I grew up in a neighborhood that had its good moments and its bad moments. I was just blocks away from the Sound View projects, so it was like, I had this world where my parents were trying to protect me from all the craziness in the Bronx at the time, but I could still see, I could still experience. There were still metal detectors put in my junior high school. There were still girls pregnant in my high school. I still saw all of this. What I appreciate and love about my parents is that they didn't shelter me. They knew what I was seeing and I felt like they were very open and honest with me about their goals for me as their kid. We want you to be successful in whatever you love to do, and just, that ingrained in me as a child from my parents who were like, "We believe in you." It has helped me out. That experience, it influences every bit I have, because it influences who I am as a person, just like being Latina. It may not be the only thing that I am, but it's going to influence my opinion in a lot of ways.

Menendez: It's interesting, though, because when I watch your comedy, I, as a Latina, see a lot of myself in it and I identify things, but I wonder if someone who wasn't would pick up on it. I don't think you start many jokes with, "As a Latina," or "As a Puerto Rican." Or-

Brillon: I purposely don't do that.

Menendez: Right. So talk to me about that, because I think sometimes when we are what we are professionally and then on top of that we are Latina, there's a certain expectation of how that will be executed.

Brillon: There are expectations. There are ways that people look at Latin performers and almost a checklist of what they should have. I left it out because I was never one of those people that wanted to capitalize on my ethnicity. It was one of those things where I was like, "It is a part of who I am and I am not ashamed of that at all," but I wasn't going to use it just to propel me or to give me a leg up on anybody.

Menendez: Did other people want you to use it?

Brillon: Yes, all the time. All the time. They wanted me to be more Latina. They wanted me to be this. They wanted me to be that. I was told everything from I wasn't dark enough to I look too ethnically ambiguous. I had people say incredibly racist things in front of me about

Latin people, because I was light-skinned, and they didn't think I was Latin. There is a lot that I went through in the industry and this is where it's like, "Man, you've got to have resilience to be in this," because I think, at the time, I think I would feel like a twinge of this, "Man, I hate this right now." I want to go off and I want to be that person. This is something I've discussed.

Brillon: It's so funny, when you're a person of color or when you're ethnic, you are very mindful of your reactions because you realize, if I react the wrong way to this situation, it doesn't just affect me. It affects anybody that walks in this room that looks like me, anybody who's Puerto Rican like me, anybody who's from the Bronx like me. You're just in a different category. So I was always very conscious of my reactions and it is why I handle everything I possibly can with as much patience and kindness as I can, as permitted. There are times obviously when I get frustrated and angry and upset and just want to scream and yell and cry. Those moments happen, but I try my best to be mindful of how I react because I want to be able to open doors for other Latin performers and I can't do that if I shoot myself in the foot.

Menendez: It's often said though, and you alluded to this in terms of, growing up, realizing that when people were sad or uncomfortable, you could make them happy, that a lot of comedians use comedy as a way of dealing with trauma and pain. Where is that true for you?

Brillon: That's how I deal with everything is comedy. Comedy became my therapy at a very young age. I also started seeing an actual therapist, but I would use it to talk about so many different things, particularly ... The most impactful being an abusive relationship that I was in for seven years. Having written a bit about it and worked on that bit to the point where it was tight and it was funny, and even though there's still that little reaction from the audience of like ... the bigger and more rewarding part is when people come up to me, and they're like, "I was in a bad relationship for years. Thank you for talking about it." That means the world to me. Is it scary to talk about your trauma onstage? It always is, but that's how comfortable you have to be on that stage.

Menendez: Did telling the jokes that you told about your abusive relationship help you heal?

Brillon: Yes. One of the hardest times of my life was when I started seeing a therapist and he told me, after I recited what I had been through in seven years with my ex, and he said, "You know, you were in an abusive relationship. You were in an emotionally and psychologically abusive relationship." Immediately, I said, "No, I wasn't. I'm way too strong for that. I'm strong, I'm opinionated, I'm smart." I remember just being just completely in denial after he said it, like, "No, no, that's not the case."

Then I sat back and I thought about it, and I was like, "Yeah, this does happen to smart women. This does happen to strong women. Quite often those are the victims of particularly emotional or psychological manipulation," and I fell for it. He caught me at a weak moment. I ended up getting entangled in this. My self esteem was already low and that's how they get you.

Menendez: How'd those Latino parents feel about you going to therapy?

Brillon: They were not thrilled. You know what? They didn't have a problem with it, but I still think, every time I bring it up, you can see the look in their face just like, "Our daughter's crazy." Immediately they were like, "She's crazy." And I'm like, "No, I'm trying not to be crazy. I'm trying to talk to somebody about all the pressures and stress and everything." Nobody likes dealing with jealous people. We know. Stop telling us. We know we're a problem. Every boyfriend I ever had was always like, "Why don't you just trust me?" I'm like ... "No. Now put on your ankle monitor and go have fun."

Menendez: You met your husband on a cruise ship.

Brillon: I did, which sounds like the setup to a terrible joke, doesn't it? I met him on a cruise ship. I met him ... It's so funny because I do talk about it on stage, but I met him at that stage in my single life where I was like, "You know what? I'm just going to be a ho. I'm not going to look for a relationship." I was in that stage of like, "I'm so tired of looking for quality in this messed up pool of people that I'm—"

Menendez: It's always when you stop looking.

Brillon: Yeah, it literally ... That day, I remember I was getting on the ship and I was like, "I'm going to be a ho. I'm going to live my ho life. I'm going to do the best I can."

Menendez: I like how that's your approach to a cruise. My approach to a cruise would be like, "I'm going to hit the buffet. I'm going to hit the buffet again."

Brillon: Oh, the buffet was a large part of my life on cruise ships, but I was just at a point where I was so frustrated because I was always a serial monogamist, and for that reason, I was never single for very long in between relationships. So, this was the first time that I was single and I was trying to actively get into a relationship. By the way, not a good idea. I needed that time to sow my oats. I needed that time to make bad choices. I needed that time to allow myself the freedom of just being.

Menendez: You wanted to hit the buffet in a different way.

Brillon: I did. I wanted to hit the buffet. I wanted to hit the man buffet. So I go to the first meeting, the first day on the ship, and across from me is the most handsome man I've ever seen in my life. I had a crush on him instantly, so I avoided him like the plague, because I figured, I was like, "No, he's probably got a girl, he's probably got a wife," because he was so chill. He didn't care about any of the little ship hoochies. He would buy beers for everybody. He was the most friendly sweetheart of a guy, and I was just so painfully shy. When I like somebody, I will never be flirty with them because I'll just hold it in until they give me the green light, and then I'm like, "Oh cool. Now we can be flirty with each other." So once he gave me the green light, like he came up to me after one of my shows and he was like, "I never got to see you perform and you're really funny and I think you're the most beautiful female comic I've ever seen." I was like, "That's very specific, but thank you."

Menendez: I was about to say.

Brillon: That's incredibly specific.

Menendez: Small pool.

Brillon: But thank you. I would've just taken "beautiful," but he is my biggest supporter.

Menendez: Is his marrying you his buying into the idea that everything that happens in his life is fair game for material?

Brillon: Oh yeah, he knew that right away. He was like ... His only request, he's like, "Whatever you talk about, just make it funny." He's like, "I don't care what you talk about, but it'll be so painful if it's not funny and you've talked about it onstage." I'm like, "Don't worry about it. I'll work on that."

Menendez: Your new HBO Latina special is called Easily Offended.

Brillon: It is.

Menendez: Are you easily offended?

Brillon: I am not. It's about me dealing with people that are easily offended. In this day and age, it can be very difficult for comedians, because our job is to observe the world and report. We observe and report.

Menendez: I thought that was my job as a journalist.

Brillon: It is, but we get to put a funnier spin on it. You have to stay serious. We get to take those stories and put a comedic spin on them when we report it, but in today's day and age, saying anything can trigger anyone now. Here's the thing as a performer, when I tell a story, I don't know your trauma. So when you are triggered, it actually has nothing to do with what I'm doing and everything to do with your emotional connection to what I've just said. Your emotional connection and your trauma, based on something that I've said, is making you upset. So when you approach a performer, just know that idea, because people tend to approach a performer with this very defensive, "How could you say that to me?" I didn't say it just to you. I said it to an entire room of people.

Menendez: So, how would you prefer that someone approach you on that?

Brillon: Be a little more open-minded and respectful, because understand that I have a job and I'm just up there doing my job. I don't know your life. I don't know at all what your life is.

Clip: *Because the world has become so sensitive. Have you guys noticed? Everybody's so sensitive. You can't say anything without hurting somebody's feelings. "You hurt my feelings." You can't even say anything about yourself without somebody correcting you. Right? You can't be like, "I hate crab cake," because I'm going to go, "How do you know they identify as crabs?" That's offensive to the crustacean community.*

Menendez: Are you the person you are onstage all the time? Or is that persona?

Brillon: It's part of who I am, for sure. It is a big part of who I am. I am playful. I am goofy. I am all those things. I am sassy. I am so many different things, and then offstage I am also just a regular person who has a therapist and suffers from anxiety and deals with life. It's a big part of who I am, but it's not all of who I am.

Menendez: You're also hosting Latino standup competition on August 16, launched with HBO Latino and the New York Latino Film Festival. When someone's doing something like that, when you're one of the comedians who's in that lineup, what do you got to do to stand out?

Brillon: The simple answer is just be yourself, because we can see through the BS. When you've been in the business long enough, in the industry side of it, they see so many comics, they see so many people they're going to know when you're faking it. This particular contest, because it's for comics that obviously have some experience under their belt, this isn't a contest for somebody who just started comedy, because you would need to have at least enough to do a special. You'd need to have enough time and enough experience. So these are people that, they're already in the zone. They already know who they are as performers. What they do is what they do. So, the people that have been submitting, and we've had some really incredibly strong submissions. What I love about this is, I've always wanted to do a project that gives opportunity to Latino performers, not just in an exclusionary way, but in a way that I get to show love to my fellow Latino performers and give them this opportunity to share what they do. To be involved in a project like this, it means a lot to me and I want it to be as successful as possible.

Menendez: So I'm completely bought in. What's the big long-term goal? What's the aspiration?

Brillon: It's to do everything. It's weird. When people ask me what I want to do, do you want to do TV? Yes. Do you want to do movies? Yes. Do you want to write a book? Yes. The good thing about me having that attitude is I don't go into it thinking, "I just want, want, want." I know my limitations. I know what I don't want. What I don't want is to end up something that is not intrinsically who I am.

What I do want when I say that I want to do it all, it's because I feel people should think that they are limitless. I don't limit myself because people like Kevin Hart don't limit themselves. People like Tiffany Haddish don't limit themselves. You look at it and you go, "Kevin is doing movies. He is doing comedy. Pretty soon, he will probably be directing and producing. He's definitely already producing stuff."

Menendez: Well, even just look at Ali Wong...

Brillon: Yeah. You look at Ali Wong. You look at any of these people that are doers. They are doing multiple things. It's not just one thing. So to try and sort of pigeonhole me to this one thing is unfair to me. What would I want to do? I would love to be Puerto Rican Oprah. I would love to be anybody that can help or put something out in the world that helps,

whether it's comedy or a book or a movie or something. I don't believe in limiting myself to one thing. Comedy will always, always be my first love.

Menendez: Gina, thank you so much.

Brillon: Thank you for having me.

Menendez: Thanks, as always, for joining us. *Latina to Latina* is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me. Maria Murriel is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez is our sound engineer. Emma Forbes is the show's intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on Radio Public, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or wherever you're listening. And please leave a review. It is one of the quickest ways to help us grow as a community.

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