



Storyteller Extraordinaire Martina Castro Has Her Own Exceptional Story

Her professional journey would make an awesome movie. From humble beginnings as an NPR intern to co-founding and producing Radio Ambulante – a powerhouse narrative journalism podcast in Spanish – to launching an international production company, Adonde Media, Martina has never stopped innovating. Today she is at the forefront of digital audio and in demand. But along the way she’s faced some real doubts, like bilingual imposter syndrome and the nagging fears that come from being a CEO.

Alicia Menendez:

Martina Castro is proof of what is possible when you just start doing the thing you love. She’s the CEO and founder of Adonde Media, which she calls a globally-minded podcast production company. She also co-founded and produced Radio Ambulante, NPR’s first ever Spanish language narrative journalism audio show. Throughout, Martina has challenged herself to grow a storyteller and digital media leader, earning respect from colleagues, and contracts with big names, like the popular Duolingo app, and the influential TED Speaker series. In short, she’s doing what she loves and doing it her way.

Martina, thank you so much for being here.

Martina Castro: It is a great honor. A great honor. I’m like-

Menendez: Cool.

Castro: I was looking through your roster. I mean, goodness. You interviewed Dolores Huerta. I was like, “I can’t believe I’m gonna be on this podcast.” This is a-

Menendez: You’re so silly.

Castro: It’s a highlight.

Menendez: You’re a digital audio queen.

Castro: I don’t know.

Menendez: Is it weird, then-

Castro: Depends on who you talk to.

Menendez: The people I talk to. Juleyka has a very high standard, so if Juleyka signed off on that-

Castro: That’s true.

Menendez: Is it then strange or totally normal to be on someone else’s podcast?

Castro: Completely strange. I mean, I still get a little flustered and nervous, but I think it's important to know what it feels like to be on this side, otherwise you have zero sympathy for the people you go out and interview, and I think it makes me a more empathetic storyteller.

Menendez: You start as an intern at NPR. That's your entrée into all of this.

Castro: Yeah. I knew I needed to get an internship. I was an overachiever in school, and so I knew I had to follow the rules, and said, "Okay, I gotta get an internship," and so I applied for the NPR internship, and I didn't get it the first time. I got one in another different radio journalism program, and then three days after college ended, I started my internship at NPR and that just kicked everything off. It was really lucky.

Menendez: You realize how lucky you are, in the sense that most people don't just stumble into their passion that early in their career.

Castro: It's shocking.

Menendez: Maybe I'm just personally envious, as someone who's career has taken lots of twists and turns, that you started there. But what's so interesting to me about your story is that you really love audio in a way that I... It took creating this podcast for me to appreciate what that even means, right?

Castro: Oh my goodness. It was such a luxury. I mean, that was my school. I went to... Everyone asks me how I learned this, and I said, "On the job."

Menendez: Can I ask you about that, though?

Castro: Yeah.

Menendez: Because I, too, I don't have a journalism degree, so I learned sitting in a newsroom all of those things. There are moments where I wish I had that foundation. Do you ever have that moment?

Castro: Yes, all the time. I wish that I had had a little bit of that foundation, so that I could more confidently enter some rooms, especially in the beginning of my career. I think in the beginning, it was really, really rough to be an outsider. But at the same time, such a gift to be in the room. Looking back, my career, it might look like a straight line, but I wasn't even sure I wanted to stay in journalism back then, and it wasn't because of the-

Menendez: What were you gonna go do?

Castro: Anything else, because I wasn't sure... Look, at my internship, my NPR internship, I mean this is months after I've graduated from college. I got sick or something, and I suffer from my migraines, and I had to call in sick, and the executive producer at the time, who no longer works there, brought me into her office and she said, "Look, I don't know if you have what it takes to make it in this industry, because this industry is tough." And it was hard. There were a lot of tough moments, and I was starting at the "top," and NPR was... It was the top. It was the best, and if I was... I had to succeed and not mess up that opportunity, and so there's so much pressure that I was like, "Maybe this isn't for me." Like, "I want to have fun doing what I do."

I don't want to be so exhausted all the time. I want to have ideas, and have them be validated by the people around me, and you know, there's a million reasons why I probably wasn't being validated in that time. I mean, I was really young. Who knows? My

ideas probably weren't very good. But I discovered the brand of journalism and storytelling that I wanted to do by chance, and just in time.

Menendez: Meaning what? What happened?

Castro: Meaning I left NPR. It was a bold move. I learned so much. I'm so grateful for that opportunity. I hate talking bad about it, but I have to be honest. It wasn't the environment for me that was going to make me my best self. And it was the beginning of me leaving journalism, and I left and went to San Francisco, and worked at KALW, and I found my best self there, thanks to people who really trusted me to be a leader, who trusted me to figure things out on my own, who created a culture of yes, and who inspired fun and creativity in a situation where we were also striving for excellence.

And that was the beginning of me figuring out that I could actually make a work environment in my image, rather than having to mold myself to a work environment that wasn't the right fit for me.

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Menendez: Radio Ambulante, which is one of the hardest things for me to get out of my mouth in Spanish, so thanks a lot.

Castro: It's that initial R, right? Like-

Menendez: It's the R, but then it's like... No, it's like it's the vowel-consonant-vowel. Anyhow, my husband's favorite podcast.

Castro: Oh, wow! Thank you.

Menendez: He is a native Spanish speaker, so I think it makes him feel like it's like a warm hug around him. I'm not at all salty about the fact that you've produced my husband's favorite podcast when I have a podcast. When you're co-founders approached you with the idea, what was the original pitch?

Castro: It was basically let's make This American Life but in Spanish. And let's reflect the true diversity of the stories we have to tell, and not have them be so one dimensional. And it was just at the right time. I had really helped grow the news dept at KALW. I was the managing editor at the time, and I really was ready to create something, and I felt like I had

enough skills to really contribute to a team. And at the time, I think I was the only one with radio experience, and audio editing experience, and sound design experience, so I became the senior producer and mixed all of our stories in my free time. And it was just so exciting. It was such an exciting moment.

Menendez: What were the growing pains?

Castro: For the show or for me?

Menendez: Both. Start with the show.

Castro: Okay.

Menendez: And then we'll come back to you.

Castro: Well, from the beginning, we just didn't have very many resources, and you know, I think we signed up for three years. I remember my co-founders being like, "Let's all promise we're gonna give it three good years." And I think we were in the fifth year or the sixth when we finally signed on with NPR. It's one of those labors of love that you don't want to let go of, and you believe in so deeply that you know it can become the thing you've imagined it becoming, but it just got harder to grow without institutional support.

And so much of what I'm doing now with Adonde Media that I had begun chatting and dreaming about with my co-founders of Radio Ambulante, and so it's not... It was a natural digression for me, and I think it happened just when it needed to, and I'm just, I'm so impressed and proud that they've kept going with the show, and I'm so, so thrilled it still exists out in the world that whatever pain I felt in the beginning, or sort of like sense of anguish that I couldn't still be part of it is way overshadowed by my appreciation of it being in the world, and my appreciation of my co-founders who still are giving it so much life. It has evolved way further than I was prepared to take it, to be honest, so-

Menendez: Right, and I think you need to know the difference.

Castro: Yeah. Exactly.

Menendez: It's a hard thing to know sometimes. You produce in English and Spanish. Your bio is available on your website in English and Spanish. You keynote at industry events in English, but then you also helped found Podcasteros, which is an organization for Spanish language podcasters. Because your work is so bilingual, I assumed that you were like always fully bilingual. But that's not totally the case. You grew up speaking Spanish.

Castro: Yeah, like my official first language is Spanish, so three-year-old Martina only spoke Spanish at home. Then the moment I entered preschool, my mother realized that I was struggling just to understand, and she freaked out, and put me in front of the television, and I learned English with Minnie and Mickey Mouse, and cartoons in the morning, and quickly through kindergarten became more fluent in English.

Menendez: Of course.

Castro: But people ask me, and I feel way more fluent. My native language is English. For sure.

Menendez: Yep.

Castro: Can I say something else about it?

Menendez: Yeah.

Castro: Which is I think it's important to say, I am not-

Menendez: It's just so emotionally fraught for me.

Castro: Me too! Me too. And that's what I want to get across, because it sounds like, "Okay, let's wrap that up with a bow. Martina's bilingual." Not true. I make these minor mistakes that throw people off, like, "Wait a second." They're minor in so far as-

Menendez: Give me an example.

Castro: Oh. The subjunctive. Every once in a while I'll just say it when I'm not supposed to, or miss it when I shouldn't, and otherwise, perfect, right? And then all of a sudden I don't say the subjunctive right, and so native speakers will be like, "Eh? What? That's weird." But it's so small that they don't correct me, and therefore I have now fully engrained these errors in my brain, and I know that I will go out in the world, and especially formal letters on email, or I'll go out in the world and speak in public, and I know I'm gonna make these mistakes. And I feel like an imposter. You know, I'm not fully bilingual. I can never proofread fully, fully a script.

I would prefer to have a professional translator proofread it. I'm making a live off of being bilingual, and so it's a huge imposter syndrome contributor for me. But I think it's so important to say this out loud. Every time I do, there's someone, especially if I'm on stage or I'm speaking in front of an audience, there's always someone out there who feels identified with me, because the language is such a barrier, but also a door to this part of yourself, and how dare we remove that for someone? Because it's just not fair that we've had to grow up with that. This feeling that we don't belong if we don't speak well enough, or somehow we can only belong if we can fake the accent, or we can fake being that person, you know?

It's been a part, it's been a theme of my entire life. It's my responsibility to go out and represent the people like us, that are not fully one, or fully the other, that live in this middle space. This is what it is to be bilingual. Truly. It means you don't always understand everything. There's always something you're missing. You're constantly code switching. And you're never fully one or the other, and that's awesome. That's the thing I want to get to, and where I'm trying to... I want to be a proponent of that, because I've suffered the other thing my entire life, which is, "Oh no, you better fit in one or the other." You know?

Like I was American at school. I was Uruguayan at home. I was... You know, it's just it was a whole-

Menendez: I know. Constantly.

Castro: Yeah, constant. Constant.

Menendez: Me too.

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Menendez: In 2016, you moved to Santiago, Chile. Why?

Castro: Yeah. Well, I actually moved to Chile because my partner at the time was not very happy with life in Uruguay. He couldn't find a good job, and we weren't ready to come back to the United States. We kind of were addicted to this amazing, liberated feeling of being abroad.

Menendez: Untethered?

Castro: Yeah, untethered, and being part of this weird ex-pat community of people who are not in their own home country, and we fell in love with Chile in a trip that we did. We traveled in a van, lived in a van for three and a half months, and traveled the entire coastline of Chile before getting to Uruguay for my Fulbright, and we said, "Let's just go back and live there." And I was like, "Well, maybe I should just start a production company."

I knew I wanted to start more podcasts in Spanish and in Latin America, and so I pitched this crazy idea to StartUp Chile, and they said yes.

Menendez: What is StartUp Chile?

Castro: StartUp Chile is a state-sponsored incubator and accelerator, where they started about five to seven years ago wanting to become the Silicon Valley of the south. They said, "Look, we, to do this, need to import knowledge, and import entrepreneurial ambition and skill and knowledge." And so they said, "Well, let's bring entrepreneurs from around the world here to Chile to work on their companies. We'll give them money for free, equity-free funding."

Menendez: I feel like half of my listeners are like pressing pause, running to their computer.

Castro: It's incredible. I could not recommend it enough. And I was part of a program called the S Factory, which is for just female-founded companies, and it was 26 badass female CEOs and founders from all over the world. It's a smaller, it's a shorter program. It's for four and a half months. We just had to get to an MVP by the end, and they basically-

Menendez: MVP?

Castro: A minimum viable product, and so, like a prototype. For me, it was a pilot of a podcast.

Menendez: But how did your time there then shape your thinking about what it was you were trying to do?

Castro: Well, first it was just so validating, because I don't have a business background. Even though I worked on Radio Ambulante, and creating Radio Ambulante, my whole role in that company was to be the producer, so I wasn't really involved in the business side of

things. But you know, that first day, when they introduced me as CEO of Adonde Media, I had just made that name up. I mean, I literally couldn't believe what was happening.

But there they were, calling me that, and I was like, "Okay, I guess that's what I am." Then they taught me all of these things, like the lingo, and how do you make a pitch deck, and how do you validate your product, and how do you go out and talk to your potential customers, and in three days after I started, Duolingo called me to see if I would help them make their Spanish podcast.

Menendez: How did they find you?

Castro: Thanks to my co-founders of Radio Ambulante. They had gone to them first, I think. That was the story, and they recommended me.

Menendez: I was about to ask you what was your first pitch like, but your first pitch was incoming.

Castro: I know. We made a pilot together, and then the startup funding really made it possible for me to get to a point where we had a first season approved, so-

Menendez: I mean, you've worked with Duolingo, you've worked with TED, NPR, VICE News, it's pretty fast growth for a company that's been around two years. Fast growth for a company that's been around two years in an industry that is expanding so rapidly that it must be hard to even know how to measure growth.

Castro: Correct. It is. So hard. People are like, "Oh, what's your five-year plan?" I was like, "I shouldn't have one, because if I did, I'd be pretending to know what's gonna be happening in five years, and this industry's gonna change in one." So, it's very short-term goals, but I knew in the beginning I'm just one person. I have a ton of knowledge and contacts. I saw so much potential of giving what I have from the US and from that experience, these now 15 years that I've been in this industry, to a whole new continent of burgeoning podcast producers.

And so, I knew that that had to be part of the calculation, and that... use those contacts to go for the clients that get it. At that time, no one was talking about podcasts outside the United States, or podcasts not in English, and I was like, "Okay, well, I think there are companies out there that understand this just by their very nature." And I made a list, TED was on that list, Duolingo was on that list. It was a kind of a combination, these three tiers of building up the producers by finding the clients that want to make the products for the audiences that don't even know what they don't have yet.

I mean, this I learned at Radio Ambulante. Everyone looked at us like we were kind of crazy when we wanted to make a podcast for Latin America. They're like, "Nobody in Chile cares about what's happening in Argentina. Nobody in Colombia wants to hear a story from Peru." Well, we're like, "Well, we do, and we think that if we make it, people are going to want it." And that's just kind of been the principle that I've used.

Menendez: You're doing two things at once, though. You're both producing audio stories, which is a thing it seems you have a mastery of, but then you're also a CEO, which as you said, you didn't go to business school. I mean, you are learning on the job. What have been the growing pains? Where are the gaps?

Castro: I think about them every day. I think that this is what's incredible about being an entrepreneur, I would say, is that you have to get super comfortable staring at your deficiencies in the face, because if you're not really comfortable looking at where you're

missing the mark, you're not growing, and you're not cut out for this. You're just made conscious of it constantly.

Menendez: Go on, tell me about all those deficiencies.

Castro: What are they? Okay, all these deficiencies. Let's get into it.

Menendez: It's funny. I think of myself, for example, as an assertive person, but I realized some of the few times I have been fully in charge of something, I actually have trouble pulling the trigger. Like I so want to make sure that I've gathered all of the opinions, and all of the analysis, that sometimes I can become paralyzed. That surprised me about myself until I got into that position.

Castro: Yeah. I'm an optimizer, so I want to know all the options. I want to entertain all of the options before I choose one of them. This is just my nature. I maybe am overly collaborative in my decision-making process. I don't like making decisions by myself. I don't like it. I literally don't even think I'm making the right decision until I hear myself say it out loud and discuss it with another person. So, things changed tremendously when I brought on my brother. Gonzalo is now the head of operations, and he joined me early last year, in 2019, and that was just a game changer, for me to just have someone that I could say, "Hey, what do you think about this? What do you think about this?"

And we now approach all sales, and all hiring, and all business decisions together, and at least I have another brain to throw ideas around with.

Menendez: What have you sacrificed to get here?

Castro: It's interesting how I don't really think about these things. I have an inner mechanism, who knows if it's like an editor, for all the decisions I've ever made, to get to a place where I don't feel that feeling. I haven't really sacrificed much. I don't think I identify with that feeling. I mean, sure there are things that I, like in my personal life, wish I had done a little differently. I sacrificed a lot of tranquility and peace. I exercised this mode of work and of navigating life, where I felt like I had to be stressed all the time, that I had to be go, go, go all the time. That I had to push myself and never feel like I was enough.

And in a way, it's like this sick sort of addiction that you become. You think that you got ahead because you were so mean to yourself in your head, because you pushed, because you weren't satisfied, because you never let yourself feel full. You never let yourself feel satisfied or proud, or like you made it. I mean, even things that I did well, I would get off like a... I would literally get off the stage of an amazing speech, and just I would revel for literally maybe 30 seconds in how it felt, and then turn around and say, "God, I wish I had done da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da."

It makes me an amazing editor, but it's not great for... You know?

Menendez: Yeah. No, I do know. I do.

Castro: So, if I could go back and do it with just a little more joy and self love, oh, man. I'd do it in a heartbeat.

Menendez: I also love that neither of us are willing to actually implement it. Right away we're like, "Yeah, that me in the past, I would cut her a break, but that me of the future, I'm gonna keep pounding on her, because she needs to know she's not good enough."

Castro: She better work! Exactly. Not yet! Not yet! I'm working on it. I'm in therapy to do this, like to try and learn a new way.

Menendez: Let me know if that works. Let me know the name of your therapist. Martina, thank you so much for doing this.

Castro: Oh my gosh, you're so welcome. It's an honor to be here with you.

Menendez: This was so fun. Thank you.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our mixer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. We love hearing from you, we really do. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, 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. Finally, be sure to follow us on Instagram and on Twitter. We're @latinatolatina.

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