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Latinos In The US: Jackie Cruz, 'Orange Is The New Black' Star, On Her Background, Work In NYC And Being Latina [EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW]

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By Maria G. Valdez | Oct 24 2013, 04:00PM EDT



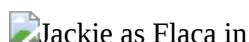


Image Maria G. Valdez

We've all seen "[Orange Is The New Black](#)," most likely in one weekend. This Netflix original series is so captivating that makes it hard to push "stop" and just forget it. It keeps you interested, and each character has something about them, a "je ne sais quoi" that draws you into them. But the coolest thing is when you meet one of them, and they have that same interesting persona in real life, but couldn't be more humble. That was the case with meeting **Jackie Cruz**, a recurring cast member that plays Flaca, Maritza's best friend.

My first impression of Jackie was that she had [a lot of style](#). And that she was like that popular girl in high school that was popular because everything she did was against the standards of the typical popular girls. She looked cool. A person who you would want to be friends with. And boy did she make me feel like I was her BFF as she talked about her life, her background and how she ended up in New York City and landing her breakthrough role in "Orange Is The New Black."

Jackie is becoming a [household name](#) now, but she actually started many years ago as a little girl with a dream of becoming the next Whitney Houston. "I actually started out singing," she told **Latin Times** exclusively. "It's a funny story because I was raised in Dominican Republic, in Santiago, and my mother took me to see Whitney Houston in 'The Bodyguard.' I was six years old and it was in Spanish. But when she would sing it was in English. So I told my mother I wanted to be like her and she said 'You know what? I think we're gonna move to LA.'"



Jackie as Flaca in "Orange Is The New Black" (PHOTO CREDIT: Courtesy of Kanessa Tixe and Dynamic Theories) But it didn't start as easy as that. Jackie was still a kid and needed a formal education. She and her mother moved back to New York -- Jackie was born in Queens, but moved to Dominican Republic when she was in kindergarten until 8th grade -- and it wasn't until she was in 10th grade that the two Cruz girls moved to Los Angeles. "My mom said 'I believe in you' and we moved. She sent a tape of me singing and acting to this music academy called **Hamilton Music Academy**. It's very hard to get in, especially because I was a Latina. There were a hundred 'Jackies' but I got in and went. I did dancing, singing, jazz, and besides that I had academics to worry about." [That was just the beginning](#) for Jackie.

Of course she's had plenty of obstacles. She overcame a near fatal car accident that almost left her paralyzed. Even after brain surgery, a coma, and a collapsed lung almost left her unable to sing or even walk, she was still determined to follow her dreams to become a musician, but she doesn't like to talk about it, she said. Jackie even moved to Miami at one point to prove her luck with a producer that had worked with Selena. But it didn't work and he stole all her money and left her almost homeless, although she claims she wasn't because she had a couch to sleep in. Those were rough times, but she knew she had something more to give.

Her first passion is music, and she has an EP out on iTunes. "It's called '[Hollywood Gypsy](#)' and I have four songs in it. I co-wrote and wrote most of them. There's one I didn't write but I fell in love with it, so I had to sing it," she said. When asked about her style, she replied, "I would say my style is soulful rock, but now I'm also singing in Spanish, and that's gonna be more urban. The Spanish stuff will come out next year. It's gonna show more of my Latina side, a lot of Dominican flavor, but I'll still show a bit of my American side to appeal to a broader audience."

How did you transition from music to acting?

"I got an agency for commercials in LA and there was this girl who was in a show. She was a famous little girl and she was my friend, and she said 'I'm gonna get you with my agency' and it was kinda hard to get in there. It was Jack Lippman Agency. I went in there and I had never done anything and this is a big company. And the agent's like 'I'll call you, I'll let you know' and he didn't call me and I kept calling and calling until he said, 'Alright, come in, read for me' so I went and read a scene for a commercial and it took him a long time before he called back, but finally he did and he's been my agent since. He's amazing, his name is Kendall Park, and he believed in me. I started in commercials and then a few small roles on TV, and then I got an opportunity to sing for this producer who produced Selena. And you gotta concentrate on one thing, so I dropped acting for a bit, I didn't go to auditions and I went to Miami to pursue my singing."

After her Miami stint didn't work out, she moved back to New York, the place she calls home.

"I came to New York with the idea that I was going to pursue singing, and when I moved here I met DJ Cassidy and he really liked my song. He played it for DJ Kiss and she played it for MTV. She said they liked it and that they wanted to feature me in the show 'The Seven,' and they did. The song was featured and it was on Times Square and it was the best thing that ever happened to me so far. But I had nothing to do during the day so I thought 'Maybe I should do acting'

again.' So I asked my friend, 'Do you have an agency?' and she's like 'Oh yeah! Go to my manager.' I went, I went to my first audition which was 'Orange Is The New Black,' and booked it."

Courtesy of Kanessa Tixe and Dynamic Theories)

(PHOTO CREDIT: Courtesy of Kanessa Tixe and Dynamic Theories)

How has your experience been so far?

"We all get along so well. We're like family. You go there and you hug everybody. Everyone asks how your day was, we go to each other's room and talk about our lives, and it's funny because we call each other by our screen names. They all call me Flaca."

Did you expect the show to be so successful?

"I did. I knew it. It's Jenji (Kohan). She created 'Weeds.' Everything she writes is gold, so I knew it was gonna be a big deal. I've been working for this my entire life, since I was 15, this is my dream since I was six years old, so the one person that believed in me was Jenji, so, do you know how amazing that is? I tell her all the time 'Thank you for this opportunity' and she's like 'You're great!' Coming from her, it means a lot."

Maria G. Valdez)

(PHOTO CREDIT: Maria G. Valdez)

How would you describe your character? Do you think you have similar traits?

"She's a person who is not afraid from anything, doesn't care what people think, says whatever is on her mind, and if you don't like it ... whatever. She's very funny but she doesn't mean to be funny. She's very serious, that's the way she thinks. I'm totally different. The only thing we have in common is that my cousins called me Flaca growing up because I was this long skinny girl. I like that we have nothing in common though. But sometimes I take Flaca with me and that's not good. When you play somebody for the week you start to act like them."

Where do you see yourself professionally? What kind of things would you like to explore next?

I would concentrate on my acting right now because it's working for me, and I would like to do Latino characters. I would like to represent my culture and show what we can do. I love my country, I love my people, I love to dance, I love my food, I'm more Dominican than American."

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Maria G. Valdez



Maria was born and raised in Dominican Republic, where she began her career in journalism covering human interest stories, entertainment, beauty and wellness for a national magazine. She moved to New York City to study Musical Theatre, but went back to journalism after graduating in an attempt of becoming the Latina Carrie Bradshaw. She has an unhealthy obsession with JLo and claims to be Sofia Vergara's long-lost daughter, and has tried a crazy amount of treatments to keep looking young. She became a Zumba instructor for fun.

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