

Answering *The Call*

Once a struggling actress in Hollywood, Anjelah Johnson's knack for comedy rocketed her to stardom, landed her a recording artist deal, and got Hollywood to call her

Words by Vanessa Pascale
Photo Credit: Robyn Von Swank

“I never expected, never in my life, never in my wildest dreams... I wasn't trying to be a comedian. I didn't want to be a comedian,” says Anjelah Johnson, who is dressed in a striped tee, shredded light blue jeans, and sneakers. Her long brown tresses are pulled into a ponytail, showing off big hoop earrings. It's a Saturday in early September, and we're in the green room in Philadelphia's Helium Comedy Club right before one of her comedy shows. Though Anjelah has been performing here since Thursday, she had to add an additional show today to accommodate all her fans. You must be pretty popular here, I comment. “What's funny is, I was *not* popular here. So when they called me and said we have to add a show, I was very surprised 'cause the last time I was here, I think they almost wanted to cancel a show. I'm excited that more people know me in Philly now. I really think it's because of my Netflix special (*Not Fancy*, which premiered October 2015 and is still streaming).”

Anjelah's comedy career took off after her nail salon bit went viral on YouTube several years ago. “After that joke came out and people would want me to come to their shows or cities... I would be like, ‘Oh, I'm not a comic. I'm an actress, even though I hadn't even done anything yet. And then it all changed for me the first time I got paid to be a comic,” she says, referencing the Mormon event she was invited to through Myspace and paid \$600 for tying for first place in their comedy contest. “That was the most money I made my entire life, in one day, in one week. That was the most money I'd ever made. So, I was like, ‘Oh. Maybe I'll be a comedian then.’”

Being funny runs in the Johnson family. “I didn't know I was funny, because my whole family is funny. My dad is hilarious. My grandpa is a big time jokerster --he's always playing practical jokes on people. We just grew up laughing a lot in my family.” Even as an Oakland Raiders cheerleader, her squad frequently turned to her for comic relief. Anjelah could do a spot-on Vietnamese accent, since she heard it so often growing up in California's Bay Area, and that's what they wanted to hear. “Ohmygod, Anjelah!” she mimics a high-pitched cheerleader's voice, “Show her the Vietnamese accent you do. It's so good. Watch. Listen to my friend!” I would be like the clown and I would do my little bit before I knew I was doing a bit.”

From Oakland, she relocated to Hollywood to pursue acting. In the beginning of January 2007 Anjelah was unemployed, opportunity-less, and depending on her sister to pay her rent and buy her groceries. “Everything in my life situation was pretty much saying, you tried but it didn't work, time to go home. The only reason why I stayed and I didn't give up is I felt like God was telling me, ‘I'm not done with you yet. Keep going.’” In L.A. she attended a church frequented by others in the entertainment industry, where they also offered free classes based in the arts on Tuesday nights. On a whim, she decided to take a writing/standup comedy class there. “I had no desire to be a comedian. It was a free class... Struggling actor trying to make it happen. You're like, Get in, where you fit in. Sure, I'll take that class.”

Against her teacher's advice to stay away from “hacky” nail salon jokes, the first joke she wrote was “Nail Salon.” YouTube was a new platform at the time, and within a month of posting the video of this bit, it had 4 million views. “It blew up my spot and it kinda catapulted me to where I am. Everyone in Hollywood sees it and wants to meet with me. I start meeting with network executives at CBS, NBC, ABC... I end up getting an agent and a manager,” she explains, adding that her life did a complete 180.” By the end of the year, she had written so much material that she started touring the country as a comedian and had booked *MADtv*. This also led to parts in *Ugly Betty* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and films like *Our Family Wedding* and *Enough Said*.

A few days before our interview, Anjelah returned to *MADtv* to reprise her role as Bon Qui Qui -- a character she created during her 2007-2008 stint on the show. “It was fun to bring Bon Qui Qui back to where she started at King Burger.” Bon Qui Qui still lives on outside of *MADtv* as a legit music artist who has a record deal with Warner Brothers Records. “We put out a full album --it's comical hip-hop. We shot a few music videos and put a tour together,” she tells me, adding that she never thought she'd be a music artist with a live band and backup dancers. When it comes to rapping and beatboxing, Anjelah's skills are on point. She gave the Helium Comedy Club audience a little taste when she rapped a few lines from “I'm a Cut You” and “No Boyfren” and backed it up with some serious moves too. Next spring, Anjelah sets off on her third music tour.

Much of what has happened in Anjelah's career in entertainment has come as a surprise. But the biggest surprise, she tells me, is that she's “a professional clown.” “I tour the country to entertain people and make them laugh. Sometimes I'll be on stage and I'll say a joke and I'll hear the laugh and it's like I'm out of body watching what's happening. And it's this weird phenomenon. I wrote something. I said it. And now this whole audience of people is laughing while they're enjoying their drinks and food. It reminds me of when people would come to Vaudeville or come to the Shakespeare plays --like, that's us. We're the ones on stage entertaining people. It blows my mind,” she thoughtfully replies.

She has crushed it on the comedy scene, lived the recording artist dream, now, she's ready to dive more into film and TV. “I would love to flip it. The goal, dream: to flourish in film and television and go on the road for fun when I want to, not because I have to 'cause that's where it is now. It is fun, but I do it because that's my bread and butter right now. I'm lucky because I get to dabble in film and TV...” Recently, she took on her first leading role in the faith-based comedy *The Resurrection of Gavin Stone* as Kelly Richardson, a pastor's daughter. The film is slated for release this January. “I'm just straight-laced, very proper... It's very different from what people are used to seeing me as. I'm excited for that to come out and people can finally see. ‘Oh, wait, she can do other things,’” says Anjelah.

A fan of crime dramas like *Law & Order: SVU*, *Criminal Minds*, *Forensic Files*, she'd love to play a role where she gets to “shoot somebody, and chase them down the street and do a full-on jujitsu, knock-

'em-out type scene.” It's only a matter of time till we see more of her on TV and in movies. “I've taken the philosophy of grow where you're planted. For some reason, standup is what's blowing up for me and where I'm flourishing, so it's kinda where I'm sowing my seeds. When Hollywood's ready for me, I'm here.”



What inspires your comedy material?

“Everyday life. You have an opinion about it, I'm gonna talk about it.” Not a fan of open mics, which she says is about practicing your material, she tests her material out on herself in the shower. “If I make myself laugh, I'm going to say it. I'm my own judge... If I do a joke in front of people and nobody laughs, I'm like, ‘Oh, I'm never doing that again.’ That's why I just practice in my shower.”

Are there any comedians you look up to or are inspired by?

“I love, love, love Ellen DeGeneres, Brian Regan. George Lopez was the first comedy album I ever owned. I like the guys who open for me and I work with. They inspire me because they help me to stay on my A-game!” She motions to comedians Joe Larson and Kristen Sivilis, who are in the green room with us. After seeing them on the road, she invited them to open for her.

What can't you leave home without?

“My vitamins. I'll die,” she says seriously. “I will 100% get sick, because I meet so many people. Shaking so many hands, hugging everyone... If my immune system is not bulked up as soon as somebody coughs I'm like, ‘Uh, I'm sick.’” ML

For more information, visit <http://anjelah.com/> and keep up with Anjelah at <https://www.facebook.com/anjelahjohnson/> and Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat: @anjelahjohnson