

Chris Velardi: It's a musical 'Cuse Conversation with Joanie Leeds, a 2000 Syracuse University graduate and the 2021 Grammy Award winner for Best Children's Album.

Joanie Leeds: (Singing).

Chris Velardi: Glad you found our podcast. I'm Chris Velardi. I think you're going to enjoy this one. Joanie shares her story and her music with us. And what a story, what a journey, highlighted by the ultimate recognition for an album [00:00:30] that was truly a passion project. A children's album designed to entertain, inspire, educate, and empower. As you'll hear, Joanie's proud to be a part of a community making music for kids, but music parents can also enjoy. I mean, it makes a ton of sense. She was a musical kid who has found success making music for kids.

Joanie Leeds: Pretty much the moment that I was born, my mom and dad told me this story, that all of the nurses in the hospital said [00:01:00] that, "That baby's not crying, it's singing." So I guess there was great expectations from the start. And then they tell me this story when I was two or three years old, I stole the microwave from a party performer and sang "Tomorrow" from Annie at the top of my lungs. So I guess I had no fear at the beginning.

I do have quite a lot of stage fright now, just because of adult anxiety and whatnot. But back in the day, [00:01:30] I loved singing. I took voice lessons with this wonderful instructor for most of my grade school and all the way through high school. I always wanted to sing. When you're young, there's not so many outlets. You have to join the choir or community theater. There's not so much. But going to college [00:02:00] and being a part of a musical program was a no brainer for me.

Chris Velardi: And so that leads perfectly into the next question, which was what put Syracuse University on your radar, and what led you to central New York?

Joanie Leeds: Well, my dad went to Syracuse. He's an alum.

Chris Velardi: So it's in the family.

Joanie Leeds: Yes, of course. Our blood is orange. And growing up, that was always a part of our family. We always talked about Syracuse. [00:02:30] I grew up in Miami, Florida, so that would've been quite a different weather transition. Very different-

Chris Velardi: Just a little.

Joanie Leeds: ... but it didn't scare me wh

connected at my audition with the two faculty members who had auditioned me at the time. Even though I literally fell flat on my face during the dance interview, I mean not even exaggerating, I fell on my face, dancing is not my strongest suit, I still made it into the program. So I was thrilled. Thrilled.

Chris Velardi: When you look back on that experience at [00:03:30] Syracuse, and I've had the pleasure of talking to a number of people who've come through that program in particular and gone in different directions. But what stands out to you about the education and the experience of being a musical theater major and being at Syracuse University?

Joanie Leeds: Well, I loved that it was a conservatory-based program. I felt like not that I didn't want [00:04:00] to do the other subjects, but I really wanted to focus on theater and music. And in other programs across the country, it wasn't always that case. You would take math and science and all of those other courses, and then limited musical theater or limited music classes. So for me, it was really important to dive all in and do that full time. And that's exactly what we got. That's great.

Chris Velardi: That's [00:04:30] what you did.

Joanie Leeds: But I had the opportunity when I was in high school to get a lot of college credits, so I actually came to school as a sophomore, essentially. I still had to take that writing studio class freshman year. But I went on this program called March of the Living, which is we went to Poland and we visit all of the concentration camps. I know this is a little off topic, but every single [00:05:00] weekend we would be going to school. So those were all counted as college credits. We went to Poland, and it was a wonderful opportunity to educate myself in my history and my ancestors. And then when I went to college, I got first pick of all the dorms, and I did have a lot of credits fulfilled. So when I was a senior, I was actually able to take a lot of classes on the Hill that I would not have [00:05:30] had the opportunity to take, had I not come to college with all those credits. So it was a win-win.

Chris Velardi: And look, every experience is something that shapes you and allows you to go in different directions. It sounds like that was very much the case with your career

Chris Velardi: Where was she from?

Joanie Leeds: Where is she from? Her name is Anadara and now it's Arnold, but at the time it was Farmer, and she's from Carlsbad, California. So here's these two sunny, California Florida girls in Syracuse, New York. We both cried every day because we were so cold. But we had so much music in common, and we came to college loving [00:07:00] all of the same bands. We loved the Indigo Girls. At the time Alanis Morissette was definitely it, early, mid-90s. So we decided we were going to move straight to New York City. And of course she was a waitress and I was a bartender. I bartended at The Bitter End, which is a music club down in the Greenwich Village.

Chris Velardi: The list of music clubs that you spent time in, The Bitter End, [00:07:30] CBGB. I mean, these are pretty topnotch places. These are the places of legend.

Joanie Leeds: Yeah, and some of them have since closed. Bitter End is still open, but CBGB has closed. There was Arlene's Grocery. This was even before Rockwood Music Hall was open, but The Living Room was a really big club to play in. And so at night I would try to hustle and play at these clubs.

But I guess I should probably mention that I went to school as a musical [00:08:00] theater major, but I actually started writing music when I was in college, which is why I was trying to play at all these clubs. I really just fell in love with being in the practice rooms. I would just close the door behind me and write. I wrote out the piano, I wrote on guitar. And then I took this really wonderful class up on the Hill with Dr. Sawyers about music industry. I learned a lot about the industry, and it really interested [00:08:30] me. It took my path in an unsuspecting direction. All of a sudden, I didn't really want to do theater anymore, but I feel like all of those classes really prepared me for this theatrical musical life. Like, no matter where you land, really nothing prepares you for living in New York City.

Chris Velardi: Being prepared for anything prepares you. You just have to be ready, [00:09:00] right?

Joanie Leeds: Yeah. I did feel prepared from the classes I took in theater, and I don't think it was a waste at all. I never look back and say, "Oh, I didn't do theater. I wasted my college." Not at all. I feel like it all plays into what I do. And now that I perform on stage for kids, it is very theatrical, and-

Chris Velardi: No doubt.

Joanie Leeds: ... I do have to use those improvisational skills. So it all worked out.

Chris Velardi: Before we get [00:09:30] to the performing for kids part, your first album you wrote while you were still at Syracuse, right?

Joanie Leeds: I did.

Chris Velardi: And I love the name of that album.

Joanie Leeds: Yes, My Job Application Knows More About Me Than You Do might be one of the longest titles. Maybe Fiona Apple's When the Pawn isn't quite longer. I just was working with what I knew at the time, which was falling [00:10:00] in love and breakups and just a lot of angst.

(Singing).

Chris Velardi: Well, it was the time for that, right? The end of the '90s. That was the [00:10:30] genre; that was what was popular.

Joanie Leeds: That was in. Very in. I guess they called it angry chick music, and that was definitely my genre at the time.

(singing).

I got a bunch of friends together that lived up on the Hill and studied at Crouse.

Gosh, I mean, some of them are working on Broadway now, but they helped [00:11:00] with that album, and it's pretty cool. I had a friend who played viola.

She was in the theater program, so

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Joanie Leeds: It is. The All the Ladies album is actually my ninth album for children. [00:19:00] The reason that I wrote that is... Okay, so I was at the Grammy's back in January of 2018. At that specific ceremony, the televised portion, the one that you watch on television, not the one where like 90% of the people who win the awards, but the evening part, only one female took home an award. It was this huge thing that was going [00:19:30] on. I mean, there was a hashtag like, what about the women? Or Grammy's so male, or something like that. But when I was sitting in my seat, I just was so flustered by that, and witnessing Alessia Cara was the only female. And yes, there were female presenters, female performers, but it was noticeable.

It struck a chord with me literally. I took out my phone and I started making notes right there during the ceremony, during [00:20:00] Madison Square Garden Grammys. I started writing like, all female album, female instrumentalists, female, songs about girl power. I was going crazy. My friend sitting next to me was like, "What are you doing?" That started the wheels turning, but I didn't actually get going with it until a couple months later, maybe even close to a year later. I read the [00:20:30] Annenberg Initiative out of California, which actually has the stats from 2012 to 2018 about females working in the music industry.

Now a lot has changed over the past couple of years, but at the time, female producers were only 2% of the workforce. There's insane stats like that, where I read the report and I was just like, "I have to do something, and I have to do it now." I [00:21:00] just started freaking out. So I went to see a friend of mine perform. Another friend of mine who was in the audience with her son, we had lunch afterwards, and I said, "I had this idea for an album. I don't know what it's called yet, but it's going to be like, I want all of the people involved in it to be women. I want the instrumentalists. I want the technical team, the engineers, the producer, everything to be female." And [00:21:30] she turned to me, and her name is Lucy Kalantari, by the way. She has won a Grammy for her jazz albums for kids, and she's phenomenal. And she's like, "I've been really looking to produce somebody." And we kind of gave each other a wink across the table, and we're whispering. Because when you have this very interesting idea, you don't want other people to know. I mean, maybe I was being a little too secretive, but I was really excited about it. So that got the ball rolling, and we started [00:22:00] talking.

I should mention at the same time I was going through a divorce, so I had a lot going on in my personal life. But this album was really just such a glimmer of hope during that really tumultuous time. She's such a wonderful producer. She got so many females involved in this project, and she cast such a wide net and was able to bring on these instrumentalists. I would've [00:22:30] never been able to find them, and she was able to get this incredible band together. So all in all, we had 20 women that are singing and playing on the album, as well as our mixing and mastering engineers, Emily Lazar and Denise. These women are

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incredible and so desired in the industry. The fact that they're on this album [00:23:00] was huge.



Chris Velardi: How does having a daughter, or [00:26:30] how has having a daughter changed, if at all, the way you approach children's music?

Joanie Leeds: Well, so before I had kids, I was working with kids for over a decade, so I kind of knew how kids worked. But then, when you have a daughter, and she's my first and only, but I did suffer three miscarriages before her, so I really, really [00:27:00] wanted a child. And growing up, being a girl and now a woman, I grew up in this world where when you form a sentence, the designated pronoun is he and him, and I never questioned it. I never thought to myself, "Well, that's weird. Why isn't it something else? Why is it always about men and the man?" It just didn't cross my mind, because why would [00:27:30] we question it?

But my daughter, she looks at things in a really different way. I'm just so grateful that the world around her is changing in this way, where if she sees a picture or if she sees a movie and it's like, all men, she's like, "Where's the ladies? Why isn't there a female character?" I mean, she's six years old, and she's pointing these things out to me. I'm so happy when she does, [00:28:00] because I know she's a really intelligent child, and she's noticing and picking up on these things. She's living in a different world than I grew up in. She's not Gen X, that's for sure.

Chris Velardi: Yeah. It's very different. And you think, if she's saying that at six, what's she going to be doing at 16? It's very exciting to think about the mindset that she's got at that age that you didn't have at that same age, and otm3 (s)2m3 (s)e i (s)27 (h)-67 (w.7

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New York in 2020. So we are bonded for life, and we're [00:33:30] always there for each other. I never knew the power of networking, and I never understood when I was in college how important it is to keep in touch with people.

(Singing).

You never know how someone is going to be able to help you in the future, and how you will be able to help other people in the future. And just getting