



GLORIA ESTEFAN INTERVIEW
THE THREAD SEASON ONE

Gloria Estefan, Singer
September 8, 2023
Interviewed by David Bender
Total Running Time: 31 minutes and 31 seconds

START TC: 00:00:00:00

GLORIA ESTEFAN:

I would question like, why would I get all this fame when I really that wasn't the point of making music. And I remember thinking, maybe this is the reason just to show people that, yes, you could go through terrible things. But it depends on how you deal with it and what you do with the cards that you're dealt and that we have power in and a lot of control over our lives in ways that we give up for no reason.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Life Stories
Gloria Estefan
Singer
Singing Through Struggles

00:00:44:00

DAVID BENDER:

Well. Welcome. Please introduce yourself.



00:00:48:00

GLORIA ESTEFAN:

I am Gloria María Milagrosa Fajardo García Montaña y Pérez de Estefan.

That's the Cuban name. I am Gloria Estefan.

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DAVID BENDER:

Well, I am so glad you said your full name. I was going to try and I would have just completely mangled it. I want to go back in time a little bit. When you came to the United States at the age of two. Tell us about what you know of that and why it happened and some of the back story. It goes to your parents and grandparents.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

My father was a police officer in Cuba. His father was a commander of the army. So when the revolution happened on that fateful New Year's Eve, he was actually part of the motorcade of the first lady, because as a motorcycle policeman, that's what he did. My grandfather had gone to military school with Batista as a young man. So they were very close. And my grandfather was not very happy when Batista staged a coup. Rather than continue to the election. But when the Castro forces came in, they jailed my grandfather and my father immediately. He had come home that night and told my mother, we're in trouble. The president just left the country and she asked him not to go back. And he said, I have to go back. I'm a police officer. My duty is to the



Cuban people and I need to go back. And she told him, they're going to arrest you. He goes, It doesn't matter if they arrest me and I have to go back. And that's exactly what happened. His father and him were jailed for three months, but they eventually let my father go because he was a very respected and loved police officer and he had done no wrong. He told my mother that he needed to get us out of Cuba because he knew what was coming. He had a very clear idea of who Castro was, and he left on the ferry to Key West to try to find a job and a place for us to live. And then my mother and I followed once. We had been in Miami a few months, my father told my mother that he was going to go somewhere. He couldn't tell her where he was going into training for Bay of Pigs. So he disappeared. And the next we heard was my mother, seeing on the news that there had been an invasion in Cuba. What happened was that even though they were trained in top of the line equipment, the equipment they were given to actually go there was all broken down and faulty. My father was the head of the tanks division and his turret was broken. They were expecting air power to follow and give them munitions. And at the last minute, I believe it was Robert Kennedy that pulled the plug and told them all to come back. The aircraft carriers that took them there turned around and left them on the shore. Some of the men tried to swim back to the ship. They didn't make it. A lot of them died on that shore or were very injured by the Castro forces that were expecting them. My dad was jailed. We found out because my mother saw it on the news. And when they released the names of who had been captured, that's where she found out He spent 18 months, I believe, in the Cuban jail. All the while that my dad was in Cuba, in jail, my mother found tiny apartments next to the Orange Bowl in Miami, two strips of apartments facing each other.



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DAVID BENDER:

With lots of other women right?

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Yes. And moved in. All of women that she knew that were also with their small children and their husbands jailed in Cuba. So it was kind of like a little commune of Cuban women supporting each other, helping each other. One car shared amongst all of them. I remember all of this. It was very clear. I remember my mother dragging me to prayer circles and and churches and masses praying for the men that had been taken prisoner. I was on a plane recently watching, and I watched Bridge of Spies, which I had never seen. And at the very end of the movie, it says that the subject of the film was the man that negotiated the exchange for Cuba and the United States, where political prisoners were exchanged, drugs and medicine. And one of those men was my father. So when I read that, I was I was so shocked. But he did come back and they. Promised those men that if they learned English that they could join the U.S. Army as officers. He joined the U.S. Army as a second lieutenant. We were stationed in San Antonio, Texas, where my sister Becky, was born. I was six years old. This was 1963. And my father had just shaking hands with President Kennedy right before his assassination because he had had an event where he was thinking the Bay of Pigs survivors and the men that had been released.

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DAVID BENDER:

This was in San Antonio.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

It was in San Antonio because he went to San Antonio before Dallas.

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DAVID BENDER:

You have to tell me your mother went to school with Fidel Castro.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Fidel Castro was at the university when my mom was at the university, not in the same year, I believe. But they she knew of him and they used to joke and call him BOLO Choudary, which means ball of dirt, because apparently he didn't bathe that often. But she said that he would walk around with mine, come under his arm, and he would practice that bombastic oratory style of Mussolini in the mirror. If you compare them, they're very similar in their style of their oratory style. So she already didn't like him even before he did what he did. But he was brilliant in his control of Cuba and in his megalomania. He was an intelligent guy.

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DAVID BENDER:



You said something which the older I get, the more I'm certain is true. It's you live in every moment. Can you talk about that philosophy?

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

I think since I talk, it came with me. It was my way of releasing my emotion. I would cry when I would sing, even as a very small child. I had a crush on this matinee star that was six years old. He was an older man. I was three or four, and his voice would envelop me when I would hear it, and my grandfather would save up money to take me to the movies to see Joselito, this young Spaniard that was an amazing singer. Music moved me. It was my escape. It was what allowed me to survive some of the toughest moments in my life. And at the age of eight, I started being able to accompany myself on my guitar. I would lock myself in my room and just put the radio on record the songs and learn how to play them.

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DAVID BENDER:

And to be clear, you had not intended you could sing from when you could speak, but you never thought in those early days you were going to perform.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

I sing since I talk, but I never would have imagined doing what I do because I don't like to be the center of attention. It's it's not my nature. My mom was the diva of the family, and nobody could compete with my mama. And I didn't



want to. I was in awe of her. She sang, she danced, she told jokes. She was the life of any room that she walked into. I was like my dad. Quiet, reserved, very sensitive, very thoughtful. I observed everything and everyone that was around me, but I was content to observe and my music was a very personal escape for me. It's not anything that I wanted to do for other people. However, I kind of got pushed into that position by my mom, who once at eight years old that I started playing guitar, would have me perform for the family or her friends or anybody that was in the house. I'd hear her go, Glory or glory money. I go, Oh, that's the bring your guitar name that she called me and I would grab the guitar and stare at the floor, but put myself into these songs. And I didn't even know what I was singing about, but I thought they were beautiful and I would learn them songs from Rafael. Nat King Cole. Songs that spoke of emotions and feelings that I had no clue about. But somehow, musically, I understood them and emotionally I would transmit them, perhaps because of all the pain in my voice, from all the things that I was living and the responsibilities that I had. I poured it all into my music. But never, ever did I imagine or want to become an artist, becoming a singer on a stage. To me, that was my mom.

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DAVID BENDER:

You're a private person, and yet you've been one of the most public people any of us know. And. And you've. But away from the responsibility that comes with that, the opportunity to help others and use that. You made the decision to talk about something that happened to you early on to help other young women.



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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Yes.

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DAVID BENDER:

Went through it. Can you talk about that?

00:11:01:00

GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Absolutely. My mother heard that one of my dad's cousins had a beautiful classical music school. So they were my dad was thrilled for me to go and studied classical guitar because they thought that it would be good for me to learn music along with my singing that I loved. But it turned out that this man was a predator of the worst kind, and it took a full year for me to bring up the courage to tell my mom what was happening with this man. Oh, I know. I think I got even more fearful because I knew that he was getting to the point where he was going to do something irreversible to me. And I knew that I had to avoid that at all costs. I was nine years old and I lost a circle of hair from my head in with anxiety. And there's always a something that comes of it for in my instance, my hair fell out. I was making excuses, not wanting to go there. So there are very, you know, strong clues that can tell you if your child is going through that. Also to prevent what you can do to help prevent that this happened to your child by arming them with tools like, you know, speaking to them openly about it, telling them you can always tell mommy or



daddy anything that's happening to you. So there are ways that we can stop this from happening. And of course, putting those predators behind bars, because they would they would get away with it.

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DAVID BENDER:

You went to school, you got a degree in psychology, you minored in French. Then you got this job you loved. You were a translator at the airport?

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Yes, an international receptionist. I was able to get that job because at the University of Miami, French was going to be my minor. So if you were studying languages, you could apply. You had to pass a test because it was still a county job. And I passed the test with flying colors and I was an interpreter for Spanish, English and French. And we were between customs and immigration serving the translating needs of the immigration officers. And I had quite an interesting experience working there. I loved every minute of it. But I also had another job teaching community school guitar two nights a week, and I started a full load of classes. The air job was six days a week. My shift was one in the afternoon to nine at night. The two nights I taught guitar was from 930 to 1130, so I would literally go straight to the other job. And then I went to school from eight in the morning to noon and would change in my car on the way to my job at the airport.

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DAVID BENDER:

But the thing that your mother put her foot down was because of your fluency in language, was there an effort to recruit you into the government?

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

There was no, I was I had the graveyard shift. Would, you know, on Sundays from one in the afternoon to nine at night. I was the only one in customs, and they had officers in there that were undercover that I had no clue about. But I had built quite the reputation in my work, as, you know, somebody that was very efficient, very professional. But I was quiet, very private. So I was approached to see if I wanted to join the CIA. I was beside myself. I was so happy. I loved the idea of that. And I came home and I told my mom she went ballistic. She said, How could you do this to me after everything I suffered with your dad? And I go, okay, Mom, okay. But I would joke with her all the time, years later. And I go, Well, ma'am, you really don't know if I join, do you? Because I kind of have the perfect cover, don't I? I'm a pop star. I meet heads of state. I get into places that most people wouldn't be allowed in. I mean, you really don't know, do you?

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DAVID BENDER:

We're making some news now.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:



I would have been a good spy. Because I am, despite my job, a very, very private person. And who knows? I mean, you never know. Well.

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DAVID BENDER:

You wound up being a public person because of your husband, Emilio. And by joining an all male band called the Miami Latin Boys.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Absolutely.

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DAVID BENDER:

Which really couldn't keep that name.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Well, thank the Lord. They couldn't keep the name. Yes. It's kind of funny because my mom, who did not want me to join the band, was kind of guilty, guilty of getting me in the position to join it. It was the summer that I had started working already right before I started school. And when I graduated high school, one of my friend was a friend that we would play guitar together. We both loved the Beatles. If we got together in anybody's house, we'd always inevitably end up doing Sing Along and all this. So he called me and goes, Hey, I want to put together a band for one night for our parents that were coming



back from a religious retreat and they were having a big party. I think it'd be really cool. I'd love you to sing. I go, Okay, absolutely. I'm there. So I went to his house and I was sitting on the floor. He was playing the piano. We're running through what songs we were going to do, and there's a knock on the door. And he goes, Oh, by the way, my father works with this guy at Bacardi Imports that has his own band Miami Latin Boys, and he called them over so he can give us some pointers on how to do this because I've never done it. I go, okay, cool. The door opens and I see a pair of bare legs and an accordion and I go, okay, great legs, by the way, because I notice them right away. So he came in, he heard me sing. We told him what we were going to do. He gave us the pointers. He played his accordion for us and he left. That was in May, in mid-summer, in mid summer, one of the my dad's army buddies daughter who I grew up and would play with in South Carolina, in Fort Jackson, was getting married. And I see this guy in a tux with the band playing do the hustle on the accordion. And I go, Wait a minute, I know this guy. He looks very familiar. We ran into each other in a doorway and on a break when he was not playing, and he goes, Hey, you're that girl that I met. And my friends go, Yeah, you're that guy that came and gave us some pointers. He goes, I want you to sit in with the band. I'm going, Oh my God. And my mother overhears this because she was listening in the minute she saw me talking to a young man that she did not know. And she goes, Yes, sing for them, because she would always make me play my guitar and sing for them when I was a kid. So I got up there, you know, holding on to that. Mike and I sing the songs and it was everything fell into place. So naturally the keys were perfect somehow for me. I got a standing ovation. Of course, he didn't know that everybody there knew me, so he was doubly impressed. And when we



finished, he said, Hey, you know, there's no girl singers and bands in Miami. And I think it'd be really cool if you could join the band. He goes, Why don't you tell, you know, come over to the rehearsal and just see how it is? So I went with my mom, my grandmother and my sister to this tiny apartment on Flagler and 47th where he lived with his parents. The band took up the entire space. The people in the rest of the condos would throw a party whenever he had a rehearsal because they had no choice. So they were enjoying the music in the courtyard there, dancing. And. And I remember being up against the wall because there was no room. And I sang a song for the band. And when we left, he goes, Look, if you want to do this, I'd love to have you. I met his parents and I told my mom, Mom, I'm not going to quit school. I really want to do this. I really want to. I have nothing that I do that's fun. And my grandmother was the one that told me because at first I was kind of listening to my mom and my grandma said, you know what? This is a gift that you received. You're supposed to share it. And one day it's going to land in your lap. And I hope you recognized when that day comes because you're not going to look for it. It's going to find you. And when she felt when she went with me to the rehearsal, after the rehearsal, she said to me, You remember what I told you? You have to do what you want to do. Your mom has had her life. You need to make your own decisions. And we joined, and Emmylou asked me if I'd ever written music that she wanted to do an original album for the band, so that we had original material. And I said, Well, I've written parodies all my life. I've written poetry. I think I could do it. So I wrote a song. We recorded it on that album. I wrote a couple and we put it out in 1976 and it got one of the songs got on the radio. All of a sudden we started getting a bigger following, and he realized when he was going to put out the record



that he couldn't call it Miami Latin Boyz with a female front. So we wanted to be called Miami, Just Miami, but you can't incorporate a city name. So he said, Why don't you call it Miami Sound Machine? And I mean, he goes, okay. But it was ended up being a very lucky name for us.

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DAVID BENDER:

I have to ask you about someone that you could talk for 20 hours about, and that's your husband, the man behind the accordion. When you decided to perform on weekends with what would become Miami Sound Machine, how much of this was what fell in your lap? What your grandmother said. You'll know it when it happens to you. And how much of it was I really like him.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Okay. When I joined Miami Latin Boyz, Emilio had an older girlfriend. There was an attraction and there was like he always had a spark in his eye. But he's a flirt. Not in a sexual way, but in. He flirts with everyone. He's like, He loves life. He loves everything he does. He's so energetic. So he was very attractive to me that way. But I saw him as my boss. He seemed a lot older than he was. He was only four and a half years older than me, and I respected him very much, you know. But there was such chemistry there that it was inevitable that this was going to happen. To the point where I had decided that I wasn't going to get married, I wanted to study, I wanted to travel abroad. I had been accepted both to the clinical psychology school in University of Miami and to the Sorbonne in France. So by the time that I graduated, I realized that I. I



preferred looking for a career in diplomacy or international law, and I wanted to go to France to do it. However, by that time, the chemistry between us had just taken us to that place. On July 4th, 1976, where he told me it was his birthday. He was lying. His birthday is the 4th of March so he could get a a kiss on the cheek. And when I went to kiss him, he turned his face and everything that had been building up just happened. And we were together from that moment on. I got married the day after I turned 21 because I knew that I wanted to be with this man the rest of my life. I think that to a degree, destiny had something to do with it. I joined the band because I really loved more than the performances, the rehearsals I thrived on. Having at my disposal instruments to put together rhythms, to experiment with the vocabulary of our Latin music that he played and the American music that I grew up listening to. And I just loved the rehearsals and the writing and the recording that it fulfilled me in ways you cannot imagine. So when we got together and we started working together with this, it just happened, unfolded naturally. It was meant to be, it felt like. And he gave me the motivation and the security to write. Of course you have to speak, Emilio, because if you just listen to what he says without knowing who he is, you want to kill him. Like he would say to me, you know, you can improve 95% when we were out on a date. And I go, Really? What, 5%? Are you dating me for? Exactly like that. But I knew what he meant was he goes, No, no, he's just sit in the rehearsal. I see you so open when you sing the songs and when you're rehearsing. And then when you get on stage, I know that you can do it so much more. Like in his own inimitable way of saying things. He doesn't edit. It just goes from his brain to his mouth. He gave me the motivation to get up there and be more who I was and relax and let the feeling of what I feel



about music take over my performance. And then it became it became more and more natural. And he pushed me more and more up front, little by little, so that I could be comfortable. And he just was amazing. And he also we were a great team. We're very different. We're polar opposite. On the astrology. He's Pisces. I'm a Virgo, but we're on the same page about business. Family comes first, even politics. We rarely had disagreements about anything, which makes for a great marriage, I got to say. And we were our own cheerleaders. We were excited about what we were doing. It's been an amazing experience and that's how it's been every step of the way, quite honestly. It's it's been a wonderful, wonderful experience with Emilio.

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DAVID BENDER:

Half a life ago. Half a lifetime. You said it feels like many lives. You had a terrible accident. Can you explain what that is and what happened?

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Yeah, it was March 20th, 1990, which was Emilio's niece's birthday. She's someone who we adore and we were traveling from. New York City to Syracuse. We're at a concert. And I thought, let me take a nap. I was on the front of the tour bus on the couch. My son was in the back with his tutor doing homework. My husband was on the phone with his brother. And he was telling him that we were on the cover of the Miami Herald that day holding this Crystal Globe representing 5 million in sales for one of our albums. And the caption was, Gloria and Emilio Estefan have the world in their hands. And



right when he reads that line to him, we get rear ended on the tour bus. The next thing I realize is I'm on the floor of the bus. It's all hell has broken loose. There was broken glass everywhere, and my husband is standing over me, covered in blood. It was like a surreal thing, and I knew that I'd broken my back. I couldn't move. But I also knew that I hadn't severed the cord because the pain was excruciating. And I told my husband to go. I broke my back and he's going, No, maybe you dislocated. Bottom line, it took an hour and a half for the ambulance to get there. There was an angel in a car behind us, and I wish I could thank, but I never found out her name. She was a nurse that showed up at the door and said, Is anybody hurt? And I go, I think I broke my back. And she saw me grabbing my leg and lifting it because that's the only thing that would alleviate the pain for a moment. And she said, okay, you cannot move. She sat behind me. She used her hands as a brace, and she said, no matter how much it hurts, you can't move. It took an hour and a half. The paramedics came. They took me out the front of the bus, which the glass had been torn away and it was snowing inside, which we now know actually helped me because you put spinal cord injuries on ice immediately and nature put me on ice. It was incredible. And that angel that came in and held my head just sat there with me until the the ambulance came and was able to get to me.

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DAVID BENDER:

Suddenly, here you are, that glow. Your husband's talking about you. You're on top of the world metaphorically. But then you wake up in a hospital bed and it's a year long recovery. Talk about the experience of your recovery.

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GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Emilio was beside himself. He went great in a two month span. He used to have a little When we met with the president. In the picture, you see a little white circle of hair on his beard. Two months later, he'd gone white. He didn't know what to do. He was feeling like, How could this happen? At this moment in our lives, we're literally at the top of our careers. The Best Moments Sold out world tour. And then he sees me having to start over. He didn't leave my side for three months, and this man has A.D.D.. He. He doesn't stop. Then I made it a goal to be back on stage. And I was back on stage first at the American Music Awards in January of 1991. And then my first show was in Miami on March 1st, 1991, 20 days shy of a year of my accident.

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DAVID BENDER:

Music heals, music brings joy. And you know what? Because you channel it. What music brings you joy?

00:29:55:00

GLORIA ESTEFAN:

Oh, my gosh. There is so much music that brings me joy. But if I reach back Nat King Cole, every time I listen to Nat King Cole, I get transported to my youth to. All this promise in front of me to a very nostalgic time to this beautiful, beautiful, like a flower. Blossoming is what Nat King Cole makes me feel. The Beatles excitement. Energy would fueled my young life. I still



remember when I first got introduced to the British Invasion and it was Gerry and the Pacemakers with Very Cross the Mersey. Then I pull up to a laundromat with my mom and the smell of the laundry came at me and this comes on the radio and I made her leave me in the car. And to this day, when I hear that, I smell a laundromat. Why? Because it's a bolero that the Brits were all about Latin music. So it was my two worlds colliding. But Carole King, Stevie Wonder, Elton John. I can't choose one. There's too many. They're all. All the music that has shaped my life has brought me joy. Music has never brought me anything but joy.

END TC: 00:31:31:00