

What Al Madrigal's Half Like Me Means to Hispanic-American Communities

Nathalie Thomas

It can be argued that Americans are having an identity crisis at the moment. More and more Americans want to identify with their ancestors and learn their histories, as evidenced by the popularity of genealogy websites such as Ancestry.com or FamilySearch.org. But as the rate of mixing of ethnic groups increases, mixed race children are finding it difficult to truly fit in in any culture. Al Madrigal, the Senior Latino Correspondent for The Daily Show, explores this idea in his special Half Like Me on Fusion. Madrigal is half Sicilian, half Mexican and admits to being described as a “Pocho”- a negative term used to describe an Americanized Mexican. After Al's father acquires a Mexican passport for him and a family reunion in Tijuana is planned, Madrigal realizes he knows little about his Mexican heritage. He doesn't even speak Spanish. Madrigal's comedy style from The Daily Show transfers over to his special very well.

He is witty and fast-thinking with fluency in sarcasm. Besides his role on The Daily Show, Madrigal is a stand-up comedian who travels the United States on comedy tours. All of this experience on television and with comedy translates well into his special. Half Like Me is Madrigal's first documentary-style comedy for Fusion and aired on January 22, 2015.

Madrigal embarks on what he calls a “Pocho-Quest” to explore his part in Latino culture and discover his roots. He begins his journey in East Los Angeles with Lalo Alcaraz, a cartoonist, and Gustavo Arellano, author of the “Ask a Mexican” column that is syndicated across the United States. Alcaraz and Arellano are good friends of Madrigal's and agree to help him start his “Pocho-Quest” by holding onto his Mexican documentation until he is deemed worthy. They begin by teaching Madrigal how to pronounce Tijuana.

Throughout his journey, Madrigal meets Jorge Ramos and Omar González, he visits a Spanish immersion school and interviews Jim Gilchrist and Dr. Vicki Ruiz. He also parties with Javier Cabral and Latin punk rock bands “Los Corruptos” and “Skeptical Youth.” Ramos, the “Godfather of Latino journalism” and face of America with Jorge Ramos on Univision, critiques Madrigal for mispronouncing his name. Madrigal then heads to Culver City, California soon after to learn Spanish from small children at a Spanish immersion school. At the University of California, Irvine, Al Madrigal interviews Dr. Vicki Ruiz about the Latino experience. Dr. Ruiz is a historian and Latino studies professor who is the author of many nonfiction works including *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia*. In this interview, Dr. Ruiz and Madrigal discuss the Latino experience in the United States, exploring the ways that it isn't defined. In other words,

there isn't one "right" way to be Latino; Latin American culture is so diverse and ever-changing that there is no way to accurately describe who is right or wrong.

Madrigal's experience with feeling like he doesn't fit in isn't unique. There's intense desire to be connected to one's roots, regardless of heritage. But in a nation like the US where everyone has an immigrant history at some point down the line, identification can be increasingly difficult to follow.

Chancellor Barnett is a half Mexican, half white Dallas film student. He's part of the fifth generation of U.S. citizens in his family. While most people would be surprised that he has any Hispanic heritage, he mostly identifies as Mexican "because my Mexican family is so huge" and they live nearby. He only speaks "maybe five sentences" of Spanish, but it doesn't bother him because his family doesn't use the language. However, Mr. Barnett does admit that he feels more distant from his Hispanic heritage. This sentiment is echoed by Madrigal and other mixed race children, even those who aren't Hispanic.