

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 when I was 17 years old and went to college. I did audition for a couple of other places. I wasn't exactly sure if I wanted to do musical theater or voice, so I auditioned for a bunch of different places. Syracuse is really where I felt the most comfortable. [00:03:00] I really

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 as well. I love that after college, after graduation, you did the New York City thing. It feels like what you're supposed to do. What was your New York City thing like right after college?

Joanie Leeds: Oh, it's so funny. So [00:06:00] my roommate freshman year, we were in Sadler, and we were completely randomly paired up. She and I are still friends to this day. She was actually a music major, and I was a musical theater major. We lived together for a couple of years in college. And then graduation day, we threw our caps in the air, and I think it was literally the next day, we rented a U-Haul truck and we drove straight to Manhattan, having [00:06:30] zero idea where we were going to live, what neighborhood. We didn't know New York City.

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 she played on it. That's Michelle O'Connor. It was great, it all worked out.

I listen to that album now, and I'm absolutely embarrassed, because I'm like, "Oh my goodness. That is..." I've come long way. I was just trying to figure out how to write a song. I [00:11:30] felt like at the time, "This is so good." Right now, I'm like, "Ooh, okay. Okay, Joanie."

Chris Velardi: The passage of time does things to all of our tastes and all of our experiences, no doubt. So let's go from angry chick music, to managing a Gymboree in Manhattan, to Grammy Award for Best Children's Album. I mean, talk about a path.

Joanie Leeds: Yeah. When I [00:12:00] went to New York and I got that job working as a bartender at The Bitter End... By the way, I took a bartending class at Syracuse, that also should be noted.

Chris Velardi: Very helpful.

Joanie Leeds: A hotel somewhere downtown.

Chris Velardi: Very helpful.

Joanie Leeds: Because I knew from my theater department that you're going to need some sort of day job so that you can audition, and in my case, play at clubs. So that's

exactly what I did. I took this bartending class, I walked along the streets of Manhattan, and I got this job miraculously [00:12:30] at The Bitter End. And so I was slinging drinks. Then everything really started to change because I wanted something a little bit steady. I think at the time, I had a boyfriend and he had a nine to five job, and I was like, "Oh, this is killing me, staying up till three in the morning, four in the morning bartending." I wanted more of a similar schedule.

So I decided to work at... Well, I had many jobs. One of them was real estate. I was doing real estate for a while. [00:13:00] I worked as a temp. I worked at Miramax Films under Harvey and Bob Weinstein. Let's see, what else? I worked at a clothing factory in the fashion district. This is what you do when you're trying to audition and sing at clubs.

And then finally, I just wanted a job where I could sing, and I did not know what that was. My cousin was like, "Oh, you should just get a job at one of those play music centers." And at the time, [00:13:30] being a young 20 year old, 20 something, I didn't know anything about kids' music or what that was, Gymboree, playing music. So I auditioned and I got in, and pretty soon I was singing songs about Gymbo the clown going up and down and whatnot.

I slowly transitioned from writing songs about breakups to writing songs that children would enjoy. It was really interesting, because all [00:14:00] of a sudden people were like, "Do you do birthday parties?" I did birthday parties through Gymboree, but they were like, "You play guitar. Can you come to the park and play a party for me there?" So it started to get a little weird, because we're not supposed to play parties for other people outside of Gymboree. But the call got a little too strong, and I decided maybe I should try going out on my own. So I formed a birthday party company. It was City Kid Music. [00:14:30] Basically I was doing between three and six birthday parties in a weekend, just traveling on the bus and the subway all around the Upper East Side. Then I kind of got into this ritzy crowd, so people were sending Town Cars for me to go to the Hamptons and Deal, New Jersey, and all over the place. It was wild.

Chris Velardi: This is not the kind of gigging a college music student envisions, right?

Joanie Leeds: No, this was never, ever... [00:15:00] I never thought that I'd be doing anything like this. I mean, working with children was something I never considered, because I was going to be a Broadway star. So this was really out of left field. But really, when I say I fell into it in a completely organic way, I mean, that is exactly it. It was very organic the way that it happened. And it just so happened that I fell in love with writing music for children, and also I fell in love with the children. [00:15:30] There's something that's really raw and honest about performing for kids, because there is no sugar coating it. If they don't enjoy a song, they are going to just... I mean, they're going to tell you, first of all. And they're not going to be dancing and jumping up and down. When they do enjoy a song, they are going crazy. I mean, it's an amazing feeling. And then slowly I

started recording my music for children. 2007, [00:16:00] I think, was the first recording I put out, in 2008. And that was City Kid.

(Singing).

A lot of the songs are very city centric about taking the subway. It's just fun, kind of jump up [00:16:30] and dance and clap your hands, do it type songs.

Chris Velardi: But it's also music. I know the term kindie rock is used, which I think is a really cute term, but it's the kind of music that parents can listen to and not be like, "Oh my God, turn that off." As a parent, that's a really important part of this genre of... You know, you think kids' music, you may think "Baby Shark", and then think, "I never want to listen to anything ever again in my life." That's not what we're talking about [00:17:00] here.

Joanie Leeds: No, no. I mean, there's actually a ton of incredible kindie music, independent children's musicians. And there's every genre that you can think of. So if you want hip hop, if you want ska, if you want jazz, rock and roll, everything. Jazz, trat jazz, every different type of jazz. I mean, it's all there. We all know each other, and we're all friends, and we go to conferences, and we see each other. We're all in the same circuit. [00:17:30] We tour and we often see each other. So yeah, I mean, it is definitely something that we all try to do our part in getting the word out. But if you need any suggestions, I have a billion children's artists that will blow your mind and make you forget about "Baby Shark".

Chris Velardi: As hard as that may be to do.

Joanie Leeds: I know, I know. Believe me, I have a six year old. I get it.

Chris Velardi: Talk to me about that album that won the Grammy.

Speaker 5: And the Grammy goes [00:18:00] to All the Ladies, Joanie Leeds.

Joanie Leeds: Thank you. I am so honored to accept this award on the evening of Ruth Bader Ginsburg's birthday during Women's History Month. Thank you to the Recording Academy, and my family that's always supported me.

Chris Velardi: Congratulations. That's a tremendous honor, and just a fabulous thing. The album itself is all about girl power.

Joanie Leeds: (Singing).

Chris Velardi: [00:18:30] You and I sat next to each other, watching Six on Broadway at the end of January. I certainly now really get why you were inspired by the girl power message of that musical. That was huge. You just mentioned you've got a daughter, so obviously this is something that's important to you.

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

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

It was supposed to be released... Well, it did release in April, 2020, but you all know what happened in spring of 2020. So it wasn't the most ideal touring experience, because it was all online. But it did give an opportunity to do a music festival, which I decided... I was one of the very first virtual music festivals, I mean, at all. Like, everywhere. So the New York Times picked it [00:23:30] up, and NPR, and there was like a million different outlets that picked it up, because we really were one of the first. So I got all of the female vocalists that sang on the album to designate a little set. I hosted, and I had no idea what I was doing. I was borrowing a Zoom Pro account from a friend, and she was like, "Okay, I think it's your turn." I mean, it was so patched together. But all in all, we had, I don't know, many thousands of people, 20,000, 30,000. [00:24:00] I don't know. It was crazy.

Chris Velardi: Wow. What did the experience. And the fact that an album called All the Ladies wins a Grammy, and was essentially an idea born as you watched the lack of ladies at the Grammys two years earlier is really pretty remarkable.

Joanie Leeds: Thank you. Well, it is a protest album. But also, the songs that are on the album are not just for girls. And I should mention that, because I think that is something that's worth mentioning. This is [00:24:30] for everybody, all genders, because we all need to support women, no matter what gender we are. There's not a lot of equity, and still there's not a lot of equity. I think it is changing, but it's a very slow change because the systemic sexism in our country, this isn't a new thing. This has been going on for a really long time. I kind of wanted to plant the seeds with the [00:25:00] youngest audiences, so I did write a song about RBG and how she contributed to equality for women. Not just women, but everybody.

(Singing).

I wrote a song about glass ceilings, which is about breaking the glass ceilings. I had a wonderful friend sing with me on that, Chava Mirel, out in Seattle.

([00:25:30] Singing).

And Lisa Loeb sang on the track "All the Ladies", which was amazing, because I'm a huge fan of Lisa, and she does children's music too as well.

(Singing).

I even had [00:26:00] a song about miscarriages and divorce. I really covered grown up topics, but I made them, as Mr. Rogers always says, "You can take any topic, and as long as you present it in a specific way, you can tackle any subject." That's what I tried to do with this album.

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 other generations haven't had. [00:28:30] This is kind of underlying in all of this conversation, but there's obviously power in music. To you, what is the biggest power that music has?

Joanie Leeds: Well, I think music is one of those things that brings together everybody. I mean, it is the universal language for sure. It doesn't matter if you don't speak the same language, or if you come from a completely different background, music is one of those things that even if you can't actually talk to each other, it can bring you [00:29:00] together. So I mean, that's for sure.

I think in my genre, we have so many different types of music that we sing for children. There's the movement songs, get up and dance. There's the lullaby songs. I mean, there's a whole genre of children's music which is just to put kids to sleep. And then there's, of course, the music that celebrate change. I think that our country, [00:29:30] a lot of people would agree that we're moving in a very strange direction.

I love writing music. I don't do it in such an in your face type of way, but I think music can actually bring messages to people that perhaps in a musical dose, it's a little bit easier of a pill to swallow. But the songs about environment; there's children's musicians, and grown up musicians too, but there's so many musicians [00:30:00] that their whole message is environmentally friendly songs.

(Singing).

When you hear it through the tune, it's like, "Oh yeah, I should recycle and not waste this, and not waste water." Some parents aren't teaching their kids that, so if they're getting it through the music, I think that's really important.

Chris Velardi: And as you mentioned, you can address some pretty adult grown up ideas for a broader audience [00:30:30] in a song that makes it less scary, in a lot of ways.

Joanie Leeds: Absolutely, absolutely. And we all do. I think that's why when parents are seeking music for their children, there's more than "Baby Shark".

Chris Velardi: No doubt. And to circle back to your musical theater roots, look, that's the way it is for adults. We address a lot of really difficult things in musical theater. That's one of the powers of theater, is that topics and [00:31:00] ideas that maybe people don't want to talk about, they'll go to see a show on Broadway and come out talking about it, whether they like it or not, because it hit them in a different way.

Joanie Leeds: It's so true. And also, for a parent, it's really interesting, because my daughter loves Broadway shows and she loves listening to the soundtracks, and they bring on all types of conversations that sometimes I'm not ready to have. I mean, we were listening to Six, and I was like, "Ooh. Yeah. [00:31:30] Okay. So now I have to talk about the birds and the bees."

Chris Velardi: You're thinking, "There might be a song in there somewhere." Right?

Joanie Leeds: Yeah. I know. But we listen to Waitress. I'm like, "Okay, now I have to explain this." But I mean, we talk about everything, and we always have. Because I'm in the mentality of, there's always a way to talk about everything. I was brought up on Mr. [00:32:00] Rogers.

Chris Velardi: As was I. Final, I do want to circle back to Syracuse, and ask you. You mentioned traveling to New York with your roommate, and just along the way, lots of little Syracuse connections, and you've got Syracuse in your family, anyway. But what does it mean to you to be a part of the Orange Family?

Joanie Leeds: Wow. I mean, I have to say when I was there, [00:32:30] I had a hard time sometimes, because it was a really hard program. I think that my time there, even though some of it was a struggle, I feel like I really learned how to have a good work ethic and how to persevere, even when things were not going my way. I feel like because of the program and everybody in the musical [00:33:00] theater program and the drama program being so close, we all went through that and experienced it together. And so we're bonded for life. We all keep in touch. We were actually supposed to have a huge reunion, and then COVID hit so it's been delayed. But I mean, there must have been like 60 people that RSVP'd from the Syracuse Drama Department. We were all going to come to

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 together and kind of talking shop. The people that you meet at college [00:34:00] are really going to be able to help you all through life. I meet people that went to Syracuse that I never met, and just because they went to Syracuse, we have that bond. So we help each other out. I think when you go to a school, you are really bonded for life.

(Singing).

Chris Velardi: You can find Joanie Leed's music on YouTube, on Spotify, anywhere you get your music, really. Just like you can find [00:34:30] 'Cuse Conversations podcast wherever you get your podcasts. Thanks for listening. I'm Chris Velardi. Stay well, and go Orange.