

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:35:18

Angelique

For me singing is that, telling a story. I'm telling my story. But my story is a story of awe. Your story is a story of awe, because our story put them together, the same thing is at the center of it. So I don't put this and that out.

00:00:35:20 - 00:01:10:14

Reeta

Hello and welcome to Transcending Boundaries. I'm Rita Roy. Sometimes the music starts before you even hear it. A quiet beat builds somewhere deep inside your foot taps. Your head moves. One, two. Three, four. Then the rhythm takes over. You're smiling. You're dancing. So is everyone around you. That is the power of great music. And today, I host a truly impressive musician.

00:01:10:16 - 00:01:44:14

Reeta

For over 40 years, she's been sharing her powerful voice with the world. Her music has captivated people globally. It's a blend of the sounds of West Africa. Jazz, hip hop, funk, salsa and gospel. Sounds from every corner of the globe. She sings in five languages, and somehow every song feels like it's speaking directly to you. She's won five Grammy Awards.

00:01:44:16 - 00:02:21:05

Reeta

Time magazine named her one of the 100 most influential people in the world. In 2023, she received the Polar Music Prize, sometimes called the Nobel Prize of Music. But her impact goes far beyond her music. As a Unicef Goodwill Ambassador, she's a tireless advocate for women's rights, education and justice, especially for young girls across Africa. Her energy is electric.

00:02:21:07 - 00:02:57:12

Reeta

Her message is powerful. Her presence fills every room. And her work touches many lives and hearts. Today, I'm honored to welcome an icon, a changemaker, the global star Angelique Kidjo. Welcome to Transcending Boundaries. Thank you for making time to be part of Transcending Boundaries. We're going to just jump right into it. You grew up in Benin. Your mum and dad were also very musical and they were really artists.

00:02:57:13 - 00:03:17:11

Reeta

Your mum was a theater director and your father was also a musician. It was, an amazing time in Benin and probably a household that was very busy. Would you tell us a little bit about your growing up and how that started to shape who you are?

00:03:17:13 - 00:03:46:09

Angelique

My first, experience of being in a right place was the space that I was given. And the fact that my parents encouraged my fear, fearlessness. And I was number seven out of ten children. And, my mum used to say that she was desperate to have another girl and because they couldn't do any scan at that time.

00:03:46:11 - 00:04:04:06

Angelique

One of my aunty come and said to her, well it's going to be a girl. And she was sing to the belly of my mother, right. And then my mother said I was born to be a girl until I was three. I didn't speak a thing when I was asked the question. You sang when you asked a question.

00:04:04:08 - 00:04:29:06

Angelique

And then you start getting worried sick. Is she going to be able to speak one day? And when I start speaking, they regret that I was singing before because I would not stop asking questions. I grew up in a household where there wer a lot of people, and for me it was normal. My ten siblings, cousins, family at large, and people we don't even know would be there in our food.

00:04:29:10 - 00:04:49:09

Angelique

When there is food, everybody was fed. And the thing that is really striking is to see the dedication of my mum and dad to education. Anyone that comes to that house, my father would say, are you going to school? When you say no. He's going to say, why? Do you have the money? You don't have the uniform?

00:04:49:09 - 00:05:16:11

Angelique

If I can provide, you have to go to school because I'm not going to allow anyone to sit in my house. Destroying the brain, not nourishing the brain. And both of them have been really, in many ways, the foundation of who I am today. Because they never tell me. Shut up. Ask the question. Is it transmission or transmission?

00:05:16:15 - 00:05:25:16

Angelique

But in it, they were the respect of myself, the respect of everybody else. And I'd been taught to respect everybody in my time. In their time.

00:05:25:18 - 00:05:51:07

Reeta

That's amazing. So education. Curiosity. Keep asking questions all the time. And I love the fact you said they just gave you that space to be who you are. Yeah. Now, something extraordinary happened when you were six because your mom put you on stage and you got to sing, like, as you were already singing at home. So you got to sing.

00:05:51:09 - 00:05:56:13

Reeta

What was that experience like going on stage? were you afraid or what happened?

00:05:56:13 - 00:06:19:00

Angelique

I should have I should have shut up. Otherwise, I would not have been on stage because my mom and the theater troupe that she had would rehearse at home. Right. And because I was such a curious child and asking questions all the time. My nickname is when, why, how, and every day I ask question? So when they started rehearsing, I know every part of it.

00:06:19:05 - 00:06:36:07

Angelique

The song part, the tucked. But everything. I was a sponge. So when they were doing rehearse and somebody forget something, I said no from the back. I said, no, that's not how you have to say. And my

mum is that. Shut up. I'm like, yeah, but he does. He's doing it right. He's doing it wrong. And then my mum's, she's say shhh..

00:06:36:07 - 00:06:58:01

Angelique

And then there is a little girl in this theatre troupe that would sing that's beautiful song that the king like. And I like Ma why can't I be the girl singing the song? And as you tell me, because you're not playing the part. I said, what is playing the part? So she tried to explain to me, and I was a grumpy I.

00:06:58:01 - 00:07:21:18

Angelique

One day that going to have a malaria crisis. And then she couldn't be there. That's why everything she couldn't stand, she was having too much fever. And every time my mum is doing that theater piece somewhere, my favorite place was to mingle and hide behind the costumes. She made all the costumes. She made all the masks.

00:07:21:22 - 00:07:43:17

Angelique

When people playing another role, they'll put the mask. And I was just mesmerized by the fact that a human being can play so many different characters. And when you wear this costume, you become somebody else. When you wear this mask, you become somebody. And it just nourish my imagination. And of course, I was. I would smell the makeup, the chalk.

00:07:43:20 - 00:08:02:10

Angelique

My eye was everywhere. And my mum is a one man business owner thing. So she would put the costume based on the scene. I don't know what's a scene. This costume look good. I just shove it inside that place and smelling it, and and I was in the middle of it. And then somebody grabbed my ankle.

00:08:02:12 - 00:08:24:07

Angelique

It was my mum. She said, you want to go on stage? I said, yeah, but I'm having fun. She goes, no, you go on stage. I'm like, no, mom. Yeah, you know, no, mom, I'm fine. She said, yeah. By the time I was talking,

she just put the costume on me out, shoving me on stage. I was, I was for the first time, I realized I have bones in my body.

00:08:24:09 - 00:08:49:08

Angelique

The shaking. But luckily for me, light wise was only one spotlight. So it was right on my face. I couldn't see anything around me. Everything was dark. And I'm like, oh, the public's not here yet, so I'm just going to do as I do home. And I go, oh yeah, these. And they let me go. And my mum and I see my mum was like,

00:08:49:10 - 00:09:10:18

Angelique

And then I finished the song and ran out. She goes, no, look, the standing ovation go back. I said, yeah, no, I ain't going back for no standing ovation. And I was and then mom, you have to go. I said, no, I can't. Then the next day I woke up. I said to my mum, it feels really good, don't you think?

00:09:10:20 - 00:09:30:07

Angelique

And are you telling that to me now? When I tell you to go take the standing ovation? And from that moment on, I think something happened without my knowledge. But I like it so much that I continue singing. I sing with my brothers music group, and they were playing in a club that belonged to a friend of my dad.

00:09:30:09 - 00:09:51:10

Angelique

So at nine years old, my mum did me that beautiful costume. She also sold fabric. So my father would wake me up, take me to sing and wait to get me back. Because in that club there were alcohol, there were prostitutes. I mean, it's a club where everything is there. So they would smuggle me through the kitchen.

00:09:51:12 - 00:09:55:21

Angelique

I would sing my two songs and I get off. I'll go home.

00:09:56:01 - 00:09:57:10

Reeta

Back to the kitchen and out the door.

00:09:57:10 - 00:10:11:01

Angelique

And when I'd go to school. I would tell my friends in school. You see, this street that we walk on at night is like, this woman sells this and they're like, yeah, liar. How do you know that? But I couldn't tell that.

00:10:11:04 - 00:10:12:19

Reeta

That you knew that I.

00:10:12:21 - 00:10:40:06

Angelique

That my father was taking me to clubs. That was not good thing to say. So that's how I get into music step by step in seeing and feeling without being able to put words to it. The power of it, the power and the responsibility of it. And I've been told many, many times through for my family at large. You have the gift of song is not up for you to keep it, but for you to share it.

00:10:40:08 - 00:11:01:21

Reeta

That's amazing that you got spirit. You mentioned singing in your brother's band, and I know just reading that Oscar, your brother Oscar was very close to you and he was 11 years older than you when you started singing. What was that collaboration like and what did he teach you?

00:11:01:22 - 00:11:31:00

Angelique

My brother was the perfectionist. Wow. And that is hard to deal with. Before you please him when it comes to music, the oh, man, you're going to go through sweat and blood. That's how he is. And he

always said to me, music is not just like you decide to do it. You have to know what you want to do with it, what it means to you and how you cherish it.

00:11:31:00 - 00:11:58:24

Angelique

Because once you write that music, people are going to listen. Your responsibility is to touch people beyond yourself. And when I started writing music he would take his guitar and we put the chords in it. For me to be able to have a chorus a verse, a bridge and a beat, a song. And he's perfection is very hard to live up to.

00:11:59:01 - 00:12:23:14

Angelique

And on top of that I have my mom and my dad and my whole family. We all love music. My mom sings, play the clarinet. My father was a postman that played the banjo. And when I started singing and really having a career, my father will fill me in super eight minute. And he would give me a week off.

00:12:23:16 - 00:12:44:17

Angelique

Yeah, man, I just sang man. Everything is cool man. And then the week after, everybody sitting down, sit down and see what you do. So he would project it. Those are the hardest moments that I've been ever been through in my life. There's no such a critic in the world that can destabilize me as much as that one.

00:12:44:19 - 00:13:09:05

Angelique

Because people that love you will tell you the truth. And it's not only the song. When you singing off key, they would tell you point blank. They would tell you this dress, uh uh. That hair do, uh uh. Those shoes, uh uh. They stripped you naked. For me to get better and to always question if I'm doing the right thing all the time.

00:13:09:07 - 00:13:33:02

Angelique

My brother passed away. Oscar passed away in 2018. And I've lost a great deal of support in the music and the music community at large. In Benin not only. I met a young artist from Guinea in Ivory Coast and he's like, no one gonna replace your brother, because no matter where you come from, you come to his studio, he's going to tell you your song needs this.

00:13:33:02 - 00:13:57:23

Angelique

This, this. Can I help you? Let's do this. And he does passion for that. So Oscar was a pillar. In my music life. And we even wrote a couple of songs together on some of my albums, but I think his spirit still live in me because I'm the harshest, harshest critic for myself and my husband is exactly like Oscar.

00:13:58:00 - 00:14:03:21

Angelique

He's the same freaking perfectionist. I used to have two and half one left, but it's okay. I deal with it.

00:14:03:21 - 00:14:13:14

Reeta

But Oscar clearly lives in you because everything he taught you and I love that line. People who love you will tell you the truth.

00:14:13:19 - 00:14:14:09

Angelique

All the time.

00:14:14:09 - 00:14:22:09

Reeta

All the time, all the time. Now, let's just move along to a point. In the life of Benin.

00:14:22:11 - 00:14:53:09

Angelique



At 12 years old, my world was turned upside down. The home of my parents were a beacon of free speech and freedom. My father always used to say, everyone is welcome. Your skin color. I don't care. The language you speak, I don't care. Will manage to find a way to communicate in this home. There's no taboo subject at the exceptions of racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia.

00:14:53:11 - 00:15:17:04

Angelique

And then i asked my dad why? And then he said, I don't have room for hatred. Yes, because hatred is a prison that you, when you start hating somebody, you build a prison around yourself that you can never get out. So you can see the way you see the sun is always blurred. The way you see people is through your own, precocious idea.

00:15:17:04 - 00:15:44:19

Angelique

A you never give a chance to anyone to prove to you wrong. And he said, I don't have room for that. At 12 years old, the communist dictatorship, the military coup happens. And that safe space that my house was no longer safe. I remember my father coming back from work, being told to be careful because the government want him to be part of the government.

00:15:44:19 - 00:16:09:13

Angelique

He said I don't do politics, I don't want to be. I'm a postman and I want to be here. I don't want a blood on my end. I don't want nothing to do with politics. Then he came back and he said to us, now we have to be careful what we say. Anyone that walk in this house is potential danger to us, because we don't know who is going to be the one telling the government what you say and take it out of context and you end up in jail.

00:16:09:15 - 00:16:34:21

Angelique

So suddenly, from one day to the other, I was sitting home shaking every time the door open, asking myself is my friend in school, are they reliable? It is a disaster for your self-confidence and the way you see the world. But at one point my mum and dad took me aside and said, you always can talk to us.

00:16:34:23 - 00:16:54:16

Angelique

The safe space we make is our room. You have anything to say? You can come and sit at the bed and talk to us. Then it gives me a little bit of comfort. But when you get out of the house, the stress of my mom when you leave is something that really is a trauma that I still live with.

00:16:54:18 - 00:17:11:23

Angelique

Because your loving parents, they want you to be free. They show us freedom. My mum and dad say you got to be free. You stand for what you do. You do right is you. You do wrong is you. I don't want guilt in this house. I don't want blame game in this house. Don't blame anybody for your mistakes.

00:17:12:00 - 00:17:34:20

Angelique

You stand for and your skin color don't matter if you succeed or if you fail. So this is what I was raised on. And so the in the political landscape is trying to take that away from me. For my parents it was, let's stay strong. We don't talk on the phone anymore because you don't know if the phone is tapped.

00:17:34:22 - 00:17:56:11

Angelique

I did my album, my first album. I took my student loans. That was due to every student to do my album. I came to Paris and I have to ask authorization from the government. And in that authorization, the stamp they put in your passport the day you leave and the day you're coming back is there telling you, if you don't come back,

00:17:56:13 - 00:18:34:05

Angelique

Your members of the family they are a liability. So I went in 24 hours. One day I walked into the studio at 8 a.m. and finished around 2:00 in the morning, vocally exhausted. It couldn't finish, but I did enough for the album to come out. And with that album, I start touring in West Africa. My first concert was supposed to happen in Togo, and the biggest promoter in Benin that was a friend of my father, pulled out two weeks before telling my father, well, I can't invest on your daughter because she's too little

00:18:34:05 - 00:19:00:06

Angelique

Nobody is going to see her on stage? And my father turned around and say to him, do you hear yourself speaking stupid? Who tell you that size have anything to do with talent? And by then my father had just retired. So his retirement money coming up in three months. So he called a family meeting and he said, I want to prove this guy wrong and I want to launch the career of my daughter.

00:19:00:08 - 00:19:21:06

Angelique

So if I get my retirement money, I will invest in it. He had no link with radio or TV. He knows nothing about doing a show. So we grab all the posters. He will write. I still have some of those. He will write the date and I will read the price. And we placarded it everywhere.

00:19:21:06 - 00:19:41:18

Angelique

And I was supposed to play in Togo. Luckily my sister was living in Togo, so we have to find a group in two weeks that we learn the whole repertoire because the musician that was supposed to play with me, they were linked to the promoter. So we find a group and I have to go there two weeks, and I did this show, and my father went to see the hall and said, this is what happened.

00:19:41:20 - 00:20:06:23

Angelique

I cannot pay the amount of money to reserve this. If you help me, I'll pay half of it. That's how my father now started my career. And then I was able, as a singer songwriter in my country, to escape. That band of the music that we have to play, it was imposed upon us. First of all the radio changes.

00:20:07:00 - 00:20:20:16

Angelique

No more music from the Western world. And it has been difficult also to keep some traditional song going on. And when you are an artist, you have to start your song, write in your son somehow.

00:20:20:18 - 00:20:41:20

Angelique

The fight continues. I mean, La lutte continue. I'm like, I'm not ready for no freaking revolution. I'm not fighting anybody. So I'm not going to sing that. Well one day it was obvious I couldn't escape it because

the excuse of my parents that day, she's not here, she's in this country and this country was not there, I was there.

00:20:41:20 - 00:21:04:03

Angelique

I mean, everybody was see, me. There was no way I could escape this show. And it was the meeting of the West African countries, the ECOWAS meeting and the all the leaders were there. So they set up the table in a way that they can be below to look under the dresses of women. And that's what the first thing when I walk on that stage, I'm like, I feel dirty.

00:21:04:05 - 00:21:20:14

Angelique

Those guys sitting there, they have the age of my dad and all laughing like is just like crazy. And my mom and dad, they came with me and they were on the wing of the stage, and I look at them and my father go.

00:21:20:16 - 00:21:22:00

Reeta

Hmmm

00:21:22:02 - 00:21:34:22

Angelique

So I sang and when we left to come home, my father and my mother come in the room. They said, please be patient.

00:21:34:24 - 00:21:53:07

Angelique

We know you, we raise you as a free thinker and free speech person. We know the challenge that it's going to take on you. But give us one year. We are going to try our best to get you out of this country. We are going to speak to your brother. He's in Paris, if he has a place you both can stay.

00:21:53:09 - 00:22:17:13

Angelique

Because we can't let you go alone and mind for yourself. Immediately I say, okay, so it took them a year to put the money together to buy the plane ticket. And it happens that one of my cousin from my father's side was getting married, and she came home without knowing all this, to ask my mom and dad to be the witness of her wedding.

00:22:17:15 - 00:22:49:20

Angelique

And they live not far from the airport. And my mom said, God have ways. Yes, let's be hopeful. We are going to use this because everybody's watching our house. Your neighbor, everyone, because it used to be such a place of freedom that people were waiting for us to just do something. Then the whole thing collapsed. So my mom and dad have to talk to my cousin and her husband to keep them in the secret of it.

00:22:49:22 - 00:23:14:06

Angelique

So we make sure that everybody know that that wedding is going to happen, the city hall marriage happen, the evening happen, and we're going to dinner. And, the evening comes. My father put his car in the garage and I wear my evening gown and make sure the door was open. It was. So see me took a picture.

00:23:14:08 - 00:23:37:20

Angelique

My suitcase was all windows in the car of my dad, and I have a plastic bag in which I put my traveling closely. So we went to the dinner and the flight that still live in from 11:45 p.m. still function to today. So when my time came close to go.

00:23:37:22 - 00:24:01:11

Angelique

The deal was you going to the toilet and father was in the car. My mom stays at the dining table. And my father drove me far from the airport. She drove me close enough for me to be able to push my suitcase all the way. And, one of the things that really helped me and still breaks my heart.

00:24:01:13 - 00:24:26:11

Angelique

I've never seen my father cry ever. And the last image of my dad was him weeping behind the wheel, telling me, am I doing the right thing? What if something happened and you disappear? I don't have any news. As a father, I'm sending you to wilderness. I don't know what's going to happen. Something happened to you. I don't know how I'm going to live with myself.

00:24:26:13 - 00:24:49:13

Angelique

And I said to my dad, dad, please let me go home. There are signs you said yes. For God's way. I'm going to be okay. I'm going to. I'm going to be okay if anything happen, even if I'm no longer on this earth, I will never blame you for anything. It's my choice to leave. So I get to the airport, check my luggage and the customs.

00:24:49:15 - 00:25:23:15

Angelique

What the government does every workplace. The dictator is from the northern part. We still we always have friction between the north and the South. So if you are the man, you have somebody from the north, somebody from the South. So the guy from the North is always spying on the southern. So I walked to the customs and, it was the guy from the south, one of the the guy that does music with my brothers.

00:25:23:17 - 00:25:47:03

Angelique

When he saw me, he knew him. And he looked at me and said, what are you trying to do? You don't have authorization, right? I said, no, I don't, he said, my colleague, just get out of here to go to the West to run, disappear, just run as fast as you can, you know, in red. I would, I would, I would grab all the steer and dive into the seat in the, in the plane.

00:25:47:03 - 00:26:00:06

Angelique

Is there, there to the plane took off is a flight attendant are coming the darkness. They know the flag is gone. What are you doing on the ground that I couldn't drink? I couldn't eat until we land and I see my brothers. I brothers face.

00:26:00:08 - 00:26:05:16

Reeta

Well. And what about Mom and dad after you left? But I couldn't say manage.

00:26:05:22 - 00:26:27:06

Angelique

I don't know, I mean, I couldn't speak to them for the first Q six years. I didn't hear the voice for six years. And, I mean, people think that leaving your home to exercise somewhere is a pleasure. No one leave the home, the safety of your home to go abroad. So the way we treat immigrant is absolutely appalling.

00:26:27:11 - 00:26:53:09

Angelique

Yes. Because it's you lose so much trying to leave a decent life. Every single human being on this planet deserve to live a dignified life in respect of his body integrity, his my integrity. No one, absolutely no man have the right to mistreat people that are looking for a better life. We are all here power, each one of us.

00:26:53:13 - 00:27:07:05

Angelique

We have tremendous power. But if we live in fear, that power becomes our own liability, because that power to go out and you keep it in because you are you afraid, you create nothing, or you create is your own misery.

00:27:07:11 - 00:27:18:00

Reeta

Absolutely. That's an incredible story about leaving. And I think about the deep, deep love of your mom and dad for you.

00:27:18:02 - 00:27:46:21

Angelique

I know my parents and I see the worries above me. Leave it in. One night I went to their room and I said, dad, mom, what is the problem? I know you guys are running around, turning around like something is eating you. Eating at you. Please can you tell me what it is? And they look at me. They said you are smart, young girl, but your heart is big and it's a liability.

00:27:46:21 - 00:28:12:07

Angelique

Where are you going? Because people see your kindness as what it is. You might see it as a weakness. What we fear is that out of despair, you might turn to prostitution or drug. Asma, that is not going to happen. If it's too hard, I don't care how. Come by and if I have to sweep the floor. What if a job is out there?

00:28:12:09 - 00:28:32:08

Angelique

You don't raise me to be lazy. So you know what it's going to be. House is too clean. There's going to be a child to look after a babysitting. I came here, I did all that. I cleaned hotel rooms and I'm not ashamed of it for one bit because I could put food on the table. My brother have jobs too.

00:28:32:09 - 00:28:50:18

Angelique

He was a student too. I could eat and I could go to my school. Even if I don't have the money to buy fancy shoes, the same coat, I would wash it and watch it and wash it and take it. I was always clean. My mom said, it's not the amount of money you spend on it, it's how you wear it.

00:28:50:23 - 00:29:01:20

Reeta

You were you had plans to actually study law, right? And then something else music came along to talk about that.

00:29:01:22 - 00:29:25:16

Angelique

I made, my sense of justice. I think I was born with it. And when I was little, every physical fight I was in is to protect somebody else. And my dad would always tell me, Angelique, I didn't teach you violence in



this house. And don't. Because when you start fighting physically, you have lost everything. There's no coming back.

00:29:25:18 - 00:30:07:21

Angelique

So use your brain is your ultimate weapon. I start saying to myself, how do brain can save me? My brain can guide me to make the right decision in everything I do it. How do I link my intellect to my heart, to my feelings? To make good decision with compassion, empathy, understanding and building alliances? When I finished primary school, my first day in high school was.

00:30:07:23 - 00:30:11:01

Angelique

Hell.

00:30:11:03 - 00:30:26:23

Angelique

I was little, I was small, so there were two guys and there were the terror of all girls that come to school. They have a stick and they put the mirror at the end of it. When you walk in, they're gonna see what you wear on that.

00:30:27:03 - 00:30:29:06

Reeta

Oh, do you?

00:30:29:08 - 00:30:51:13

Angelique

And they would tell you, what are you doing here? You finished primary school is good enough for you. Why do you need to get married in the in? I was getting so frustrated. One day I came home. I see dad, I'm gonna beat this guy. I'm gonna beat these guys so bad. And then he said to me, use your brain.

00:30:51:15 - 00:31:02:11

Angelique

Find something to say that they would not understand. And then there was. Do you crazy? And that's exactly what happened. That's how baton come about.

00:31:02:13 - 00:31:03:22

Reeta

Oh.

00:31:03:24 - 00:31:26:19

Angelique

And law has something to do. Also, with that moment, I decided at one old school, because when I get to a secondary school, there are a lot of kids that were transferred from the North because of the I don't know what the difference is when the child comes in there. He's from the North. He's stupid because he's from the North, and I'll be fighting for everybody.

00:31:26:21 - 00:31:45:07

Angelique

I'm like, just don't stop saying that is stupid. Everybody. I'm fighting for everybody's A-game. Everybody. And I said to my dad, when I grow up, I'm going to be a human rights lawyer or a surgeon because I love helping people. And also when I get there, I realized for the first time what it means to be a child, to be married.

00:31:45:07 - 00:32:05:01

Angelique

Because all my girlfriends, we make plan. Some of us were in the same high school. Well, I'm making plan. This is going to be doctor. You're going to do this? I was the only one that made it. All of them. This vanished from the face of the earth because they get married. And when I arrived in France, it was too late for me to register in any law.

00:32:05:01 - 00:32:24:22

Angelique

But I went to a music school. I did two years of classical training, and I have two friends that was at the University of Dallas, and they live on the campus and they were studying law. Both of them. They said,

come the school you have studied already, come to do the classes. You have to see if you really know what you want to do.

00:32:24:24 - 00:32:53:14

Angelique

So every time I have the time, I'll go with them. And I remember one day I like one teacher that been a law, and I was fascinated to see how he talked about defense in acquisition, how you are in the court when you have something in you, in your guts, you know that the person is innocent. How you fight in law, that you use, how you use the law.

00:32:53:16 - 00:33:09:16

Angelique

But sometimes he comes in. Is it enough of the class? What do you want to do with it? Why are you here? That day happens to be me. Why are you here? What it means to be a lawyer. What do you want to do with it? And I looked at him. I said, I want to do. I want to be a human rights lawyer.

00:33:09:18 - 00:33:31:13

Angelique

He went, wow, this is the first everybody's talking about business lawyer and this. You want to be a human rights lawyer? And I said, yes. And he said, why? I said, because I believe in justice. And then he said to me, you know, that you have to study political science as in order to politics. And in that way it's playing to you.

00:33:31:15 - 00:33:56:15

Angelique

And he said, was you a case? And if you were to be a human being, a lawyer, how will you defend your client? I said, okay, who? And he said to me, there is a country that is in hot seat because they made a huge mistake. Is the government's fault, but upright is so high and so dense that they need a scapegoat, they need somebody to blame.

00:33:56:15 - 00:34:17:11

Angelique

And they sacrificed one of the citizens to go to court. When he's saying them like this, how you really defend him. I say, first of all, I said to the guy, first of all, if he's the president, he's standing on my court. If he's the minister, he's telling him, I don't care who he is. I have standing no, no innocent in jail ever.

00:34:17:13 - 00:34:35:05

Angelique

He said, you understand what I said? I said, I don't care the state the government existed before because of us. They are not above the law. They are not the law. They are the ones that keep the law in check. And they're going to break the law because they don't want to bring the pot here, not going to work, ever.

00:34:35:07 - 00:34:36:08

Reeta

And what is.

00:34:36:09 - 00:34:58:15

Angelique

What is it he said to me? Well, I don't think you you're going to let me hit you tonight. It doesn't work like that. I said, you know what, I don't care. I ain't going to be alive anymore, if that's the way. And he told me one thing that really stick with me, he said, one thing you have to understand is that laws are written by human beings, and most of the time, law does that justice.

00:34:58:16 - 00:35:02:18

Angelique

I say, thank you, sir. You've never the caffeine for me. I ain't coming back.

00:35:02:24 - 00:35:03:16

Reeta

I'm coming.

00:35:03:16 - 00:35:04:09

Angelique

Back in.

00:35:04:11 - 00:35:23:01

Reeta

Love us. Wow. Well. And so music became the form of advocacy for justice, for climate, for gender, for equality. So you said, bye bye, professor. I'm on a different path.

00:35:23:03 - 00:35:25:09

Angelique

My court will be the world.

00:35:25:11 - 00:35:26:21

Reeta

Wonderful.

00:35:26:23 - 00:35:52:16

Angelique

Because I live people that taught me that even what you have little you can. You still can help. Even when you have nothing positive thing you can do. In all all of the things that you say, they're all one for me because we cannot talk about human rights law, protection when there's not good education, good health, a society that is built on trust.

00:35:52:18 - 00:35:59:23

Angelique

Our voice is the mirror of our souls. We cannot do without those things because that's the way it is.

00:36:00:00 - 00:36:23:21

Reeta

Also goes back to what Oscar said, that the role of the music and these words is to touch people beyond yourself. So very, very powerful, very powerful. Let's just take a little turn somewhere along the way.

You met your life partner, Fish On. Can you talk a little bit about that, how you met and how you fell in love?

00:36:23:23 - 00:36:44:16

Angelique

I mean, we were both in the jazz school. It was my first year, I think, when I arrived and the day I arrived to, register, it's an old building, you know, they have corners. You do. You go and take the stand. It still goes down. I didn't know where to go. I was the last indigenous. There.

00:36:44:18 - 00:37:04:00

Angelique

And I saw two girls coming down the street, Brunet and the blond. And I asked them, where is the admission desk and what for? I said, I want to register in the school. And then they go, you have from Africa, right? I said, yes, and they said to me, you have nothing to do here, jazz is not made for African people.

00:37:04:02 - 00:37:30:00

Angelique

I'm like, just tell me where the admission center is. And I didn't know that the funder of the school was on top of the state and heard all of these surveys. So I went in register and then he came to apologize to me. I said, no, no, I apologized. They are responsible for what they say. You create this this school, you don't you cannot apologize for every stupid person that comes to this school right.

00:37:30:02 - 00:37:45:09

Angelique

But he said to me that day, he said to me, at the end of the year there is a concert and I know I hear in your voice you're going to nail them on the wall and I'm going to provide you the musician. You need, and you and I show them how we do it. And that was so before that.

00:37:45:09 - 00:38:03:02

Angelique

Then June happened. June, we have something called fete de la music and I didn't have a band. Is the music everybody everywhere, the whole in whole France. They put the music out on the street. They

play. So I didn't have a band. And then he said, you're not playing, why are you suddenly I said, I don't have a band.

00:38:03:03 - 00:38:27:20

Angelique

He said, come. And a group of guy playing it, it jump in, her friend, his friends rehearsing, and then there's a in a cafe there. And they said, you go play there. We played and then we continue. And the year passed by and two years after we started working together, and I remember vividly we were playing, he would take his parents car and put everybody in it.

00:38:27:23 - 00:38:48:03

Angelique

We play and we come back because we can't afford standing in hotel. And the thing that I realized that we left everything the same time, we have the same things. Did we just start clicking like that? And every time we coming back, he said, one of you have to stay awake to keep me awake because everybody's diarrhea, and I will see I'll be the one that keep him awake.

00:38:48:03 - 00:39:19:21

Angelique

Everybody has to live by the snow. Oh well. And it that's how we fell in love and the passion that we have for music. We knew that there's nothing more important for both of us than music. So we fall in love with friends. And then we do music together. For the first ten years of our wedding, he was my musical director, my husband, the father of my daughter, and she's the whole I don't know how he he managed to juggle all those hat on his head, but he did.

00:39:19:23 - 00:39:36:09

Reeta

Go. How did the Tonga begin? You talked about that schoolboy bully and you said he had something to do back in your childhood about the Tonga. But tell us about how you started it. And what does Bad Tonga mean?

00:39:36:11 - 00:39:52:23

Angelique

That story I told you was the part of it that I left out to be able to talk to you about this. I grew up with a one of my best girlfriends. I live across the street. I grew up in front of a mosque, part of the my mom's family. They are Muslim. So as I do Christmas, I do taberski.

00:39:52:23 - 00:40:18:14

Angelique

I do it all and I go to grad school. When summer time come, I have nothing to do. I say go there, learn something, how I will and I will. Like this. I was born with that kind of spirit of old people. She like to be the mother of all, taking care of everybody. She was also really smart at school, so we made plans that if whatever we do, we would keep in touch and then we will be there for each other.

00:40:18:16 - 00:40:43:21

Angelique

And then she never make it back to school. And I ask my father to go find out what happened. And my father said he sent her away to get married. I remember me screaming out of my now, I was so mad. I was so Abby. I was sad the whole year. I lost my appetite. My parents was really worried about me because I would, I feel powerless.

00:40:43:23 - 00:41:09:22

Angelique

I don't know where she was. I can't reach out to her because I know if I reach out, I could get her out of there. And it's that powerlessness, that anger, that thing that is in my belly that is screwing me up every day and imagining the pain I feel while in that situation. I mean, we were so close that my body will ache days in and day out.

00:41:09:24 - 00:41:32:12

Angelique

And then I said to myself, this is wrong. And my father also tell me I'm sorry. I couldn't help because if I have known before, I would have talked the parents out of it. Then I become a Unicef Goodwill Ambassador in 2002. And my first question then was, what does healing tell? What does it mean if I have to go around shaking politician hands?

00:41:32:12 - 00:41:57:22

Angelique



Don't call me because I will shame you always. This stuff, you are it and this is not what you want to do. I see, I want, I want to do work with kids and women. It was the year that they signed primary education for all girls in Africa. So I start recording PSA radio, TV, many different languages and my first trip with Carol Bellamy was in Tanzania.

00:41:57:24 - 00:42:22:14

Angelique

So here we are dealing with goiter. What it created, we found out, is that the consumption of salt without iodine create that. So with Unicef to find a solution to buy test for the women, to test the salt, to buy, then we can instead of doing surgery we have to cut that on forever. Yes. And at one point I have to go to an orphanage.

00:42:22:16 - 00:42:45:24

Angelique

It was the beginning of HIV, an age of eight. I'm like, I walked in and my whole belly just let out, almost vomit. I'm like, no way. Kids having HIV Aids, they will start their life on this food knowing nothing about nothing. I could not accept it it and then it was a little boy that was. I mean, I don't know what he funny.

00:42:45:24 - 00:43:16:01

Angelique

Me just grabbed my skirt and I touched him. It was so hot. And she he brought me to the. I was quite I was just cleaning jump I husband in that moment it he can do nothing to stop me. And he's feeling also so painful. And I sat down there and as I was crying, the little boy said to me, we didn't bring you here to cry now you to seen him.

00:43:16:01 - 00:43:38:10

Angelique

And I couldn't. So he went to the other good skill. And they also want to talk to us. Oh yeah. Oh yeah. I'm like. And he came back. I'll wipe my tears first. I'm not what is that? What does it mean to Kwanza. And he say means children first total Kwanzaa. And then he said to me, I have a message for you.

00:43:38:12 - 00:43:47:04

Angelique

It's okay. I'm listening. He said, can you let the world know that children of this will have to be their priority? Wherever we are?

00:43:47:06 - 00:43:47:23

Reeta

00:43:48:00 - 00:43:59:00

Angelique

And I wrote a song that was my second visit, the third visit was with mothers and we sat talking.

00:43:59:02 - 00:44:20:11

Angelique

And in that setting a lot of things happen. I've done this so many times. It's something I get out of there. My heart is broken in pieces, but I will put it back and walk on. And the mothers are telling me, Angelique, we want you to be the role model for our girls. We don't want them to have the fate that we have.

00:44:20:13 - 00:44:42:07

Angelique

We don't want them to get married early. We follow your pieces. We heard what you say. We are putting our girls to school. Even if you have to fight the fathers. But you have to help us out here. Because once they finish primary education in this school, they're going to end up in early marriage like we do. What are we doing for secondary school?

00:44:42:09 - 00:45:07:12

Angelique

So I came back. And I ask, what can we do? This is not yet any I mean that's not the issue right now. I'm like it. That doesn't answer my question. And you tell me, what do you want, Angelique? So going to school, you won't. You want to succeed? It's a failure because the drop, the rate of dropout is too high.

00:45:07:14 - 00:45:30:05

Angelique

And I look at them, I say, you call this yourself expert? If he easy, why bother? Are you kidding me? You're going to tell me that you can't do nothing? I got to do this. So somebody introduced me to Mary Louise Cohen and John Phillips, the lawyer from Washington, DC. And they have that revived the law of whistleblowing.

00:45:30:05 - 00:45:47:22

Angelique

And every time they win a case, they put the money in a phone call opportunity fund. So when we met in New York, they say, how can we help you? I say, I want to put girls in secondary school in, I don't want to be in cities. I want to walk the dirt road to God. And no one, no one cares about.

00:45:48:03 - 00:46:18:12

Angelique

I want to go there. And I say, how do you envision this? I said, what I want is that if we put those girls to school, it won't cost a thing to the parents. We have to provide 1 million, the uniform and the books. I want them to have mentors. I want them to be safe in a want us to be able to reach out to parents, community leaders.

00:46:18:14 - 00:46:43:09

Angelique

If the government does want to come in, I'm cool with it, but I want my kids to be able to go to school with no problem at all costs and no teacher abuse. Otherwise, you know, I come to the country. You know me. That's a story of Osama. So we started it in five countries Benin, Mali, Cameroon, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone.

00:46:43:11 - 00:47:05:19

Angelique

The first shock for me was the girl in Mali and she died. That disappeared from the radar because of the terrorist that is right there. It gives you nightmare. For months we built a school in watch of the second city and we work with NGOs local and from the get go. For me it was empower the community to take care of the girls.

00:47:05:22 - 00:47:07:04

Reeta

Yes.

00:47:07:06 - 00:47:27:05

Angelique

And in ABA, in Ethiopia, we work for Mercy Corps. What we do there because we try different things in different places. What we tried there was to give the scholarship that we give to the child, to the mother as a loan, and the mother in return can pay the scholarship. We reinstall the parents role in the parents all.

00:47:27:07 - 00:47:34:13

Angelique

And that was a very successful. To make a long story short, we start in 2006.

00:47:34:15 - 00:48:05:22

Angelique

And then as an organization, we realized that some girls have fell off the crack. And then we decide we need another approach to be able to salvage the investment we've made in girls. For them to have a future. So I start working with Population Council and they had something called girls you don't need to have online, but you have cell phone.

00:48:05:22 - 00:48:24:01

Angelique

You put that up on it and you can map a community of 5000 people a day. So that's how we start this new phase of a Tonga, by asking the girl, what do you need?

00:48:24:03 - 00:48:53:16

Angelique

And it was absolutely mind blowing. What? I knew it in my core, what they need. But I can't talk for me. I don't talk for them. The voice is stronger than my voice. I'm just there to be the person that want to find people. Help me help you. That's all they said they need safe spaces. So we started with Girls Club that become that evolved to the to be business circle.

00:48:53:18 - 00:49:25:00

Angelique

We start from 16 to 20. Now we are from 18 to 40. The thing that is really important for me to bring about here is that when you empower people to see their own self as a leader, leadership is not just having a degree and being a minister or a doctor or whatever it is. Those young girls, they thought about what it is that they want.

00:49:25:02 - 00:49:32:10

Angelique

We all ourselves, women that are in positions of power, not only to talk, but to walk the talk into it.

00:49:32:12 - 00:49:52:05

Reeta

Yes, once you leave everything you have done and touched and succeeded, you have still stayed so grounded. Back to your values, to back to what Mom and Dad imparted in you, what your brother taught you. How do you do that?

00:49:52:07 - 00:50:20:22

Angelique

I didn't choose to be born in Africa. It happens because I don't know God's work. One thing I know is the benefits of being famous at the early age. We've been granted family. Give me the grandness. They never allow me to be it a prima home diva. My father, I remember at 12 years ago, I said, my my dad, I'm making money.

00:50:20:22 - 00:50:44:04

Angelique

Why could I live alone? I thought I said, okay, take your stuff. Go away. Go rent your house. I'm not. I don't mean like that. Say no. Unstained under my roof without going to school. And I said, but dad, you making money? Isn't that the point of going to school? My father does know. The point of going to school is to know that this world that you live in, in is an ever changing moment.

00:50:44:09 - 00:51:09:00

Angelique

What you see today might not be there tomorrow, but if you're not educated, how do you see the changes as an opportunity, not a threat to you? How can you see leave open minded if you don't take the word, the change in the world as opportunity for you to grab it, to do something else. And I'm not. But then don't teach me in school my first day, I don't care, I'm telling you so as long as you're my daughter, you're under my roof and I pay the school tuition.

00:51:09:02 - 00:51:24:00

Angelique

You go into school and I don't want any artist in my my house. You. I don't want anybody to be stupid and not my mom. Use that against me. Like my mom brought salad on the table. I'm like, oh, and I eat that salad. I'm not. If I bit my mom, I'm saying, you want to die, stupid or I.

00:51:24:01 - 00:51:49:18

Angelique

That's a little quick because just the idea of that stupid is is is more painful than any disease in the world. So I stay grounded. Because why should you think that being famous give you any right? Yes. To feel superior or to treat people bad? I don't do that. Every time I go to any place, concert place, I'm greeting everybody.

00:51:49:18 - 00:52:11:10

Angelique

The guy does sweep the floor as more important than me, because people that put all this stuff together don't put it together. I don't know how to plug amplifier. I can't do all of that. It's the concert is also a community for me. Communities are the core of my being. My father always used to say, when you have you embark in an endeavor.

00:52:11:12 - 00:52:30:17

Angelique

Find people that think alike in that not think alike. For you to be successful, you need both. You need to surround yourself that have a vision close to yours, and how you do it is by trusting the ability to do it. You can be a boss being that you you want to be a boss. Don't have anybody to do it yourself.

00:52:30:17 - 00:52:59:15

Angelique

You don't know everything. You can do it yourself. So I stay grounded because every concert is different. I never, ever walk in any stage and take that stage for granted till the concert is over. Is not done. And the public that pays to come. They deserve you being naked spiritually, as my mom said, you cannot be open for people to be able to open their soul to you.

00:52:59:17 - 00:53:31:17

Angelique

My vocal doctor said to me, Ma'am Kidjo, can you give 75% onstage as a doctor, do you 75% of your vision? He said, no. I said, why are you asking me that? Humility. Bring you to heights. Humility allowed you to question yourself all the time for you to face what you've done wrong and apologize. My father say you do something wrong, apologize otherwise you live in gift.

00:53:31:17 - 00:53:36:09

Angelique

It gets going to kill you is a poison. So I don't do guilt. I don't.

00:53:36:11 - 00:53:47:21

Reeta

Actually give. You had one message. One more message to send to young people, especially young people. All moms and dads who are listening to you. What would that.

00:53:47:21 - 00:54:12:13

Angelique

Be? What I would say is that we can't crush people dreams. If you don't dream anymore, you're no longer a human being. As I say, this, what are we proposing? For the dreams to come to life. What I say to youth today I see it, I feel it. The youth is impatient in Africa is a time ticking bomb.

00:54:12:15 - 00:54:40:13

Angelique

And I don't want to blow. So I ask them to be patient, to work with us. And if we work together, they will tell us what we need to do. We bring the knowledge to them. We need a partnership with them. And I

will tell them, listen as you talk. Listen. Because by listening, the program you expose exposing you see it differently and you see the solution differently.

00:54:40:15 - 00:55:01:22

Angelique

We need to give them respect. We always underestimated the youth to be part of the discussion. When we are making a decision about the future, they are not at the table of discussion. We can't continue doing that. And I want to tell the youth I heard them. I've been on the footstep for so long because I ask question in the talk to me.

00:55:01:24 - 00:55:28:17

Angelique

They trusted me and I've been thinking about solution for them. Be with us, work with us. There are people in the world that are willing to help, to listen. Let's be these people and let them be our ambassadors. Let them be the next leaders that we nurture, nurture. And I want it. I want to see them succeed. I don't want hands off for them.

00:55:28:19 - 00:55:32:07

Angelique

I want them to work hard to get it amazing.

00:55:32:09 - 00:55:43:02

Reeta

Angelique. Thank you. Thank you so much for sharing your wisdom, your spirit, and also your life story about how you became Angelique.

00:55:43:04 - 00:55:45:16

Angelique

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you.



00:55:45:18 - 00:56:29:04

Reeta

From a childhood in Benin, where the rhythms of traditional music shaped her early years, to the global stages where her voice has become a symbol of hope and empowerment. From a young girl singing in her native language to becoming one of the most celebrated multilingual artists on the global stage. From facing personal challenges to building a life dedicated to uplifting others from Benin to the world stage, Angelique Kidjo Journey is a powerful narrative of passion, resilience and unwavering commitment to making the world a better place.

00:56:29:06 - 00:56:43:10

Reeta

Her life and work are true testament of the transformative power of music and advocacy. She continues to transcend boundaries, inspiring millions around the world.