

SHE'S THE ONE THAT WE WANT

Comedy legend Margaret Cho dishes on what gets her livid these days, why she's grateful for the next generation of funny people, and how we can laugh in the face of our fears

BY JENNIFER CHEN

MARGARET CHO IS just about to embark on her national comedy tour, "Live and Livid," and she is taking a moment to reflect on her journey as an actor, comedian, and longtime activist. She's chatting with me from her home base in California over Zoom while her tiny Chihuahua, Lucia, perches on her shoulder, giving her occasional kisses, as our discussion touches on everything from gracing *BUST*'s Spring 2000 cover to her run-ins with anti-Asian hate. Just like her razor-sharp comedy, Cho's anecdotes make even the worst situations—like almost getting run over by hateful bigots—seem funny. When I mention she'll be featured prominently in *BUST*'s 30th anniversary issue, she says, "I still have my Golden Bra Award that *BUST* gave me downstairs on display. To me, it's such an important publication. I'm just so glad we're both still going." This prompts me to ask if she ever imagined, back in the spring of 2000, that both she and *BUST* would both still be making waves

23 years later. "I didn't think [about longevity back in 2000], but of course I'm so grateful," she says. "I still count *BUST* among the 'zines. To me, *BUST* is still part of the 'zine renaissance."

Before Cho, 54, became the standup icon she is today, she found inspiration at age 8, when she first saw legendary comedian Joan Rivers on TV. She credits Rivers for showing her that comedy could become a career. At age 14, Cho enrolled in a comedy contest for college students. She pretended to be in college and won first place. The prize: opening for comic Jerry Seinfeld. Today, she fondly remembers how Rivers and Seinfeld took her under their respective wings. "I was a really young Asian American queer comic. I didn't know anybody like me. To go into the comedy world where everybody was older, white, and mostly men was hard. Joan would always set aside time for me. She gave me advice and encouragement. She always told me what a big fan she was of my work," recalls Cho. "Same with Jerry. They both had an interest in my career and well-being, and that was such a big deal."

PHOTO BY JEN ROSENSTEIN



Now, as Cho sets out on her ninth live comedy tour, she is moved by the achievements of other queer Asian American artists. “Whenever I see these incredible successes,” she says, “it reminds me that it’s just the beginning and it’s so exciting.” The night before we talked, Cho spent time with her *Fire Island* castmate Joel Kim Booster; the film’s director, Andrew Anh; and Sherry Cola, standup comedian and star of the upcoming comedy *Joy Ride*. “They said that I inspired them. To me, it’s a full-circle moment,” she says with pride. “It’s also tremendously important to me, because it’s my greatest achievement to inspire this generation to create work.” In the same breath, Cho jokes, “I definitely take credit for [this year’s big Oscar winner] *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. I did that. It all started with telling queer Asian American stories, and that’s what that movie is. I feel like Little Richard taking credit for rock ‘n’ roll. But I’m just so grateful for *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, Ali Wong, Bowen Yang, and everybody out there who saw themselves in what I do and then took it so much fur-

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ther. Plus, they have to give me jobs. That’s why I talk about them all the time, because I’m always begging them for work.”

Asian Americans have traveled a long road toward acceptance in Hollywood. I mention 94-year-old actor James Hong, who played the sharp-tongued grandfather in *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. At the Screen Actors Guild Awards, when he and his costars won for Outstanding Cast, Hong addressed the many racist stereotypes he’s had to play throughout his career. Cho nods in agreement. “James Hong is really incredible, because he is so enduring and iconic,” she says. “He waited it out through so many generations of hell. He is from the *Charlie Chan* days, so he is a living part of our cinematic history. I think he’s a great example of how far we’ve come.”

Even with all the forward momentum for Asian Americans in entertainment, however, Cho and I have both been horrified by the racist, anti-Asian

hate attacks that have sprouted around the country, particularly after former President Trump called COVID the “China Virus” and “Kung Flu.” Cho tells me about her own experience with anti-Asian hate when she was walking with her dog in Florida on the day the “Don’t Say Gay” bill passed. “I encountered a group of 50 semi-trucks that were flying flags that said ‘China Virus,’ ‘Kung Flu,’ ‘Save the Children from the Groomers,’ like *Mad Max*, rolling down the street at terrifying speeds and honking their horns at me,” she says. She recalls she attempted to take a video of their license plates as one of the trucks tried to run her over, “but their license plates were covered. I was the only person out there wearing a mask, which makes me more Asian somehow,” she jokes. “You have to have a video if there’s a hate crime or else you can’t have a GoFundMe.” While Cho wasn’t physically harmed, the incident serves as a reminder of what race-based intimidation looks like up close.

Throughout Cho’s career she has often tackled taboo topics in her standup, including sexism, racism, homophobia, and her own personal struggles, but always with an unvarnished, no-holds-barred attitude. I ask Cho how her standup relates to her activism, and she’s clearly ready to answer. “There’s an urgency because our identity, safety, and civil rights are at risk. We’re talking about legislation against our bodies with the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Our bodies are being outlawed. Our rights are being

taken away. Our identities are being policed. It’s very challenging to not go into a place of despair, but comedy really helps. Humor helps us cope,” she says. Our interview is just one day after the Trump indictment became official, prompting Cho to add, “There are so many things to be furious about, but there are things to be excited about, like Trump getting indicted over Stormy Daniels. I love Stormy Daniels. She’s a friend of mine. I’m so grateful to her.”

In addition to over 30 years in comedy, acting is also important to Cho because she loves expanding the idea of who can tell a story. In recent years, she’s appeared in acclaimed TV shows like *Hacks* and *30 Rock*, and in films like *Fire Island* and the new March 2023 Disney movie *Prom Pact*, in which she plays a high school guidance counselor. “I’m giving Annie Potts from *Pretty in Pink*,” she says of that role, continuing, “I’m so excited I get to play a lesbian, Asian American guidance counselor as the voice of reason in



PHOTO BY SERGIO GARCIA

this beautiful story about an Asian American woman who’s trying to figure out balance in her life. That’s a really cool message. Plus, our stories are finally being centered as Asian Americans, which is a really great thing, too.”

Her latest national standup tour, “Live and Livid,” launched on March 1 and runs until September 9, so I ask Cho what she’s livid about nowadays. “It’s a lot,” she says. “There are over 400 anti-trans, anti-gay, anti-drag bills. We need to eradicate firearms. We cannot fall under this guise of a Christian nation.”

Cho says she’s eager to hit the road for the first time since the pandemic and perform in front of live audiences again. She also loves watching standup and has high praise for some up-and-comers. “The person I’m most excited about lately is Atsuko Okatsuka,” she

says. “She has a special on HBO Max called *The Intruder* that’s great.” She also mentions the work of Black comedian Naomi Ekperigin; Latinx comic Marcella Arguello; and Vietnamese American, transgender, lesbian raconteur Robin Tran as ones to watch.

Before we say goodbye, I mention I met Cho years ago. I saw her perform in her one-woman, off-Broadway show, *I’m the One That I Want*, in New York. I also share that seeing her performance in October 2022 at The Largo in Los Angeles was cathartic. She made me laugh about anti-Asian hate—something I was very angry about. “It’s really scary, because we can fall under this sort of fear,” she tells me. “The thing is, we can laugh at the fear. We can laugh at this ludicrous thing that has to be funny, so we can save ourselves with humor.” ■