

Get It Right: Amy Aniobi

Jamie Broadnax: Welcome back to Get it Right, a podcast that explores the inner section of pop culture and social justice. This is our first episode since the election, and well, it's safe to say that nothing feels the same. People are angry, people are scared, and nobody's really sure what lies ahead, but that makes it especially important to hold tight to the things that we love, and celebrate the things that reflect the world as we want and fight for it to be, so I'm very glad to continue our discussion on the state of black women in TV. Last week, we spoke with Ester Lou Weithers about her new show, Pitch, and breaking into network TV as a woman of color. This week, I'm so thrilled to be joined by Amy Aniobi. Amy is a writer and producer on the HBO comedy, Insecure, as well as NBC's upcoming mid-season comedy, Trial and Error. She's also the host of Modern Manners for Amy Poehler's Smart Girls. Amy has a lot to say about what makes Insecure special on-screen and in the writer's room, and I think it'll put a smile on your face after a difficult week. Let's get into it.

Amy, thank you so much for coming on. I'm so excited to talk to you.

Amy Aniobi: Thanks for having me, Jamie. I'm really stoked to talk to you. I've been following you for a while on the internet, so it's really cool to finally get to hang out with you a little bit here.

Jamie Broadnax: Absolutely, absolutely, so I want to get to know a little bit more about you outside of the four corners of the internet. You came up as a writer, but you've also spent some time in front of the camera. Can you tell our listeners a bit about your career path and what led you to Insecure?

Amy Aniobi: Yeah, sure. I've maybe had a weirder path towards writing in television because I feel like customarily there are a lot of people who started out as actors and you're waiting for someone to give you words to say, and so a lot of people as actors are like, "Why don't I write my own stuff?" And then very often fall in love with writing, and become writer-actor, writer-producer-actor, and then sometimes just become writers, and I actually didn't get into performing until after I'd already been a writer, so I started knowing I wanted to be a writer while I was still an undergrad. I went to Stanford University and spring quarter of my senior year, I took a screen writing class. They had just started a film major at the start of my senior year, and I took a screen writing class, and I was like, "Oh my god, I love this," and I had always been that girl who waited to the last minute to do an essay for class. I would have three hours to write a 17-page paper, and somehow get an A, and I had so many friends through college who were like, "I think you should be a writer," and I was like, "That's not a job."

Then, finally, I took this screen writing class, and I loved it, and I was just like, "I like this structure. I like thinking this way," and then I skived off overseas and lived in France for a couple years and was living some Bohemian life and writing on the side, and it was really when I came back to LA after a stint abroad, that I was like, "I want to be serious about this," and I enrolled in the MSA program at UCLA with a focus on television, and it was really after that, way later, I got my first job as an

assistant, way down the line, on a television show. The show was Happy Ending on ABC, and most of the writers on that show took that traditional ... They were comedian performers, and then started writing, and so they all came from UCB. It's like UCB royalty, like Brian Gallivan and Jackie Clarke, and my first day on the job, I was listening to them talk and their lingo and the way they talked to each other and the vocabulary they use ... I was like, "Oh, fuck, I need to learn that."

Then literally my first day on the job, I went home and signed up for improv classes, and then that's when I fell in love with improv, so it really was backwards, and I still do improv to this day, and I really love it, and even the inspiration to make my own web series wasn't because I was so performance minded, it was really because I wanted someone to noticed my writing.

Jamie Broadnax: For those of us who haven't seen the show, Insecure, can you give us an elevator pitch for the show?

Amy Aniobi: Yeah, sure. Insecure is a half-hour cable comedy. Let me just start at the very beginning. It starts Issa Rae and Yvonne Orji, as two girls who are 29, living in LA, and they're having those insecurities you have when you're about to turn 30 about everything. Am I with the right man? Am I at the right job? Why is my relationship stuff not working out? Is this the life I want to be in? The thing that I think makes it super special is it's not only set in the backdrop of Los Angeles, in Southern Los Angeles, like Inglewood, an area we don't get to see that often portrayed in a positive light, but secondarily, it's also featuring two dark-skinned, black women, and that means that their particular viewpoints are culturally, I guess, resonant right now, so it's the very universal story of two women about to turn 30, trying to figure out their shit, but I think it's got this added layers of specificity in that it's too black leads, and it's set in south Los Angeles, which makes it super cool.

Jamie Broadnax: That's awesome. Yeah, vulture.com had described as Insecure as exploring the complexities of blackness. Is that an accurate description, and if so, what does that mean to you?

Amy Aniobi: I would say yeah. For the most part, that is accurate. It's exploring the complexities of certain times of blackness. I think Issa has gone on record as saying she's normal as fuck, and she wants to portray the normal black woman, and I feel like so often in media, the intricacies of blackness are explored either through a high culture and low culture. I love Olivia Pope, but her life is not my life. If I'm wearing white, I'm spilling wine. My weave is kept on my head. Nobody's pulling it out, so for me, I love the idea of portraying a woman who is an average black woman, who has the concerns that most people would have, and by that, obviously, it is like a middle class story, and I think that's something that's very unique because black people are so rarely allowed to be portrayed as middle class. It's like we're either upper class or we're lower class, and it's hard to find people in the middle, and so yeah, I think it is exploring the intricacies of blackness, but I would say of a particular type of blackness: the normal type of blackness.

Jamie Broadnax: Yeah, that's what was captured so well on the web series, *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*. I think that's why it resonated with so many people, because it was about a girl, and a particular type of girl, that we haven't seen, this archetype that we've never really seen on television or on the inner webs, but we finally got to see that depicted, and I know, for me, personally, I was just like, "Oh my gosh, Jay is my tribe. I can totally relate to this character," so it's not a surprise to me that it became such a fan favorite so fast, and I'm so happy to see it evolve into an HBO series, now titled *Insecure*, so it's amazing to see the progress.

Amy Aniobi: Awesome, thank you. Yeah, same here, I actually wrote for the web series as well. It was my first writing job was writing for *Awkward Black Girl*, and it was so refreshing to ... No disrespect to the early rooms that I worked in, but they were very white, and so getting to come home and be with people who are like me, and still talk about the same things that those rooms were talking about, but getting to say, "In this story, we're going to depict it with these people, and through this lens, and with this voice, this specific voice," because Issa has a very specific voice, it just felt so empowering. Even working on that web series, I was like, "This is the kind of stuff I want to create. I want to make things that are for diverse audience and that has diverse people both in front of and behind the camera," and I feel like seeing *Insecure* come together and watching Issa's vision, that she'd had for years, finally get to this place, it's been really rewarding to be a part of that journey.

Jamie Broadnax: I'm very curious to know: what does the writer's room like over at *Insecure*?

Amy Aniobi: Short word: amazing. All the writers on *Insecure* are incredible. I love our room, and I know the word diverse gets bandied around, and I almost hesitate to use it now, because it's such a buzz word in this industry, and now I think the leaning for me is more towards the word "inclusive", and I think that *Insecure* is a room that is very inclusive of different voices. It's predominately black women, which is amazing. I've never been in a room with another black woman, but that's incredible. I think there are four or five black women, including Issa, and there's a white, straight male, a gay, white female, a black, gay male, a straight male, a black male show runner, so it's a very mixed room in that respect, and even though yes, I think there could be opportunities in the future to pull in other voices that are not black and white. I do think that as a starting point for creating this show, this has been just incredible to see all these voices come together, and to have so many black women in the room, and we all have different points of view.

It's like that has been so rewarding, because there's so many rooms where they're like, "Once we have a black person in this room, we've got someone to speak for all the blacks," and it's like, "No, that's not a thing." It's like, "I'm different from my neighbor, who is black, from their neighbor who is black," and so getting to be in this space where you have all of these women together, and we're all thinking different things about a particular subject, it makes for the best conversation. It's a great room.

Jamie Broadnax: You guys touch on some really great topics. Some that are just really top topics that

we talk about on the inter-webs and all over, and particularly, there was a recent episode that aired where Molly tries to explain code switching to Rasheeda and used some code switching over at the firm where she works, and I just wanted to know why is it important to bring up this topic on the show, and for our listeners who may not know, what is code switching?

Amy Aniobi:

Well, code switching - and I honestly think everyone does it, whites, blacks, everyone codes switches - it's like changing the way you talk, based on your audience,, it really is changing basically being a business black. It's like you're working Wells Fargo Bank, and to being a street black, like you're eating hot Cheetos and tacos, and it's like you can go to either poll or anywhere in the middle, and it's still a version of code switching. You can tell from my voice. I've had the voice of a middle-age white secretary my whole life, and so my family is Nigerian and I grew up in Texas, so I don't know how I ended up with no real accent, but as a result, most of my life, people have accused me of talking white, and I'm always like, "I talk like me," but there are always times where I can throw out some hell naw's, and whatever, and usually it's when I'm with a more diverse group of people, when I'm almost like ... I don't know. There's a comfort, and you let down your guard when you're with people you know.

Even valley girls do it. It's something that I think has been appropriated to black culture, but I think everyone, every culture does it. I have Indian friends who will throw in slang from Indian culture when they're talking with their other Indian friends and then translate to me, and I'm like, "Oh, okay," and that's a version of code switching, so yeah, and I think it's something important because as our communities just in America and especially in major cities like Los Angeles, as our communities become more blended, you find yourself traveling between two worlds a lot, and I even remember going to Stanford and then going home to Texas, and then going home to my Nigerian home with my parents. It's like there was three different cultures that I felt like I was navigating by the time I got to college, and when I was in the hallowed halls of this university, I was dropping SAT words like nobody's business, and then when I'm with my friends, my Texas friends, I'm saying "y'all" and "fix it", and all of that stuff, and then I go home to my Nigerian family and I'm saying "that costs five, five dollars," and I'm talking at a restaurant with my mom.

It naturally happens for people who are, I think, upwardly mobile, and then there are some people who jump, and I think that's what Rasheeda's character did, where she clearly was in an area where she felt comfortable, and then because of her excellent academics, she jumped into this white, white world, and usually, that, I think for people who are upwardly mobile, especially people of color, that can happen gradually. You start out. You're in public school, and the maybe you go to a private school and then you do an internship and you're learning along the way, "Oh, these people talk differently, and if I speak more like them, I'll fit in more," and I think that's at the core of it, and why people code switch is because they want to fit in more.

I think the Rasheeda character is so interesting because she clearly has never had to do that, so even though we don't specify where she went to law school, she clearly did well at law school, but she didn't switch it up, and now she's in a world where for the first time, she's being coaxed to do that to fit in more, and she's chosen not to, because she's never had to before, and this is a harsh lesson that I think can happen sometimes, and Molly is both right and wrong for telling her to code switch or implying that she should, because she's right in that she knows the culture, but she's wrong because you should never police someone else's choice of speech, so it's an awkward conversation, but I think in a general sense, if you're a newcomer and someone who's been there is giving you advice, you got to soak that advice in. Even if it feels awkward, you got to be in a position where you're like, "Maybe you know better than me. I'm going to listen to you," and in this scenario, Rasheeda didn't do that, and then things got awkward.

I think that's something that could happen to anyone, and so I felt it was important, especially in our room, mostly black women, where we were just very comfortable with each other by the time we were breaking stories, and we talked about that, about the places in our lives where we feel like we've been code switching, and we thought it was something that was pretty universal to a black experience.

Jamie Broadnax: I just want to hang out with you guys in the writer's room. It sounds like you guys have so much fun in there.

Amy Aniobi: Yeah, we do, we do. It's like we work hard, we play hard, and that old adage. Work gets done first, but then we do well, then maybe we'll have a Nerf gun war.

Jamie Broadnax: Well, I'm curious to know, because you guys cover so many topics, like code switching and microaggressions at work and dating and sexuality, do you guys ever get into it over anything? Is there something that you guys argue about the most in the writer's room?

Amy Aniobi: Yes, and I think that it's always led to what I believe to be a great story. Anytime that there's an argument in the room, eventually someone will say, "Put it in the script." It's just like we're having this conversation. It needs to go in the script, so my episode is episode six, and in that episode, there is a big conversation about black masculinity, and that was something that was just a line in the room, especially there was few guys in the room, so they were very loud about, "No, this is what it means. This is what that means," and we women were divided on certain issues, and then eventually we were just like, "Oh, this is an episode. Let's put it in the script." I think the same thing happened with dating sites. I recently started a relationship, and before that, I'd been on so many dating sites, and I had all these rules for how I used them, like what time of day, and what kind of message, and all this stuff.

Then other women in the room were saying, "Oh, yeah, me too. Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. You can't say stuff to someone on OkCupid after 6:00 p.m. on Friday. Then they just want to fuck," so it's just like we were all talking about how we interacted

on dating sites, and the guys were flabbergasted. They were just like, "What? This is a thing?" And we were like, "Okay, put it in the script." It's like there are so many moments that they're are just bred of conversations, and when we see conflict, and not even conflict, but I would say curiosity in the room, when a majority of people in the room are expressing a curiosity about a topic, then we're all like, "Okay, well then that needs to go in the script, because that means we're not the only black people who are curious about this topic."

Jamie Broadnax: Nice. Put it in the script. Awesome. You also live tweet the show, which isn't something that you see very often from TV writers, so what made you want to do that?

Amy Aniobi: It's so interesting. It's something that's been growing, I think, in the last maybe ... I guess since Twitter started. Nothing revolutionary there, but in the last five years, I've started seeing more shows do it. I've done it on shows in the past, where maybe it wasn't quite as, I guess, engaging, because for the most part, your audience is watching the show when you're on Twitter, so they're not looking for you, but one of these crazy things is just the presence of black Twitter. They can make or break an opinion about a fan, an opinion about a show, a character, an opinion about a story, and so for us, especially because Issa came up in the web and has so much connection to the web world, we were like, "We want to engage with our fans. We want to hear what people are responding to, what they're not." We want to makes sure that the dialogue and the discourse stays open.

The show, even just in it's conception, it's a social show. It's a show about a friendship, so you're going to watch this show with your friends, and it's a show about relationships. You're going to watch this with your SO, or with your friends who are dating your friends, who are single, or anything, so we were just like, "We want to be able to engage with people that way," and my favorite thing is every episode I do of couples, raise your hand if this has ever happened to you, usually 10, 20 moments in the show, and seeing people retweet it is always such a treat for me, because I'm just like, "I want to know. Are we hitting something? Are we saying the right thing about what we think this black experience is about?" It's so rewarding to see people be like, "Yes, yes, this has happened to me," in real time, I think has been just really cool.

Jamie Broadnax: You guys are really awesome with the fans. I just want to say thank you for embracing this Solnsecure hashtag on Twitter.

Amy Aniobi: Oh my god, I love it. When I saw it, I cracked up. I was like, "That should be the official hashtag, because lord knows we're all so insecure." Kanye voice included.

Jamie Broadnax: Yes. It's so much fun live tweeting the show, and there's so many real moments, and people articulate that on Twitter, and they retweet some of the quotes that are said through the episode, so it's great that you guys engage so much with the fans and the followers of Insecure. It's awesome to see.

Amy Aniobi: I'm so happy to hear that. Yeah, we were so giddy. I've been following Black Girl Nerds for so long, and I stumbled upon you guys a while back, and then when you were talking about the new Marvel superhero - I can't remember - the dinosaur girl. There's this Marvel comic.

Jamie Broadnax: Oh, Moon Girl and the Devil Dinosaur.

Amy Aniobi: Yes, exactly, Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, and I was like, "I need to find out more about this black girl. Nerds is tweeting about it," so it was such a treat. We were viewing the premiere. All the writers were together and the cast and we're watching the show, and just live tweeting and we started seeing SoInsecure come up, and we were just like, "Oh my god, that's amazing," and I was like, "Guys, it's Black Girl Nerds." We were all stoked, so that's just awesome. I'm so happy that you guys are supporting the show as well. It means a lot.

Jamie Broadnax: Absolutely. It's a no-brainer, and Issa Rae's Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl definitely gave me the strength and the wherewithal to go out there on Twitter and go out there on the internet, and just create Black Girl Nerds, so I have a lot to thank Issa for that with Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl. Absolutely.

Amy Aniobi: I'm so happy to hear there, and yeah, if you haven't let her know, you should, and I definitely will too.

Jamie Broadnax: Yes, I did. I got a chance to tell her that when I was at San Diego Comic Con two years ago, so it was really great to meet her in person and I was like, "Thanks to you, Black Girl Nerds is here, so I appreciate all that you've done."

Amy Aniobi: That's awesome. That is so awesome, and that's what I want to hear, Jamie. That's the stuff that really excites me is hearing black women getting fired by other black women and the fewer walls there are between us, and the more that we lift each other up and take inspiration from each other, then the stronger creative voices we have, the stronger presence we can have in our creative jobs, and all that is important. It's like the more representation you see, and the more that people like you ... You're giving people a voice. You might not even know how now, but there are people who are watching Black Girl Nerds, and being like, "Okay, now this is something that I want to do," and I think that's just so empowering, especially given the current political climate, not going to act political, but you know, just how things are right now, it's so important to see your heroes doing things and then to say, "Okay, maybe I can do that too," so thank you to also inspiring other black women to follow their voices too.

Jamie Broadnax: Oh, thank you so much, and Insecure, it definitely feels like a step forward for television as a show about black people by black people. What else would you like to see from the industry going forward?

Amy Aniobi: I think one of the things that I find to be important to me is showing blended worlds, because I love that Insecure is this strong, black voice, but I think the world

I live in is blended. I have just as many black friends as I have friends of other races and cultures, and so I would love to see shows where worlds are blended, because even on Blackish, for instance, it's like he's in his black home and then he's in this white workplace, and even though that's pretty realistic, I just wish that there were more shows that painted a blended world, because I think we do become what we see, and I would like that to be more of a thing, and I also want ... Big goals, is that these shows that might have whiter audiences, I want the people creating them to think about people behind the scenes even if ... Because I've heard the excuse so many times where because the show is about a family, and they cast a white male lead and a white male mom, they're like, "Well, now the family's white, so the whole cast is white, sorry," and it's like, "Okay, but that doesn't mean you only hire white writers. That doesn't mean you only hire white camera people. That doesn't mean you only hire white crew," so whatever you can do to push inclusivity forward, I think is important.

It doesn't stop with just casting, and I think there has been enough proven to show that people of diverse voices can write diversely, so it's like why not employ an Indian man to write for your white show? There shouldn't be a line, just because their color is different. Talent is talent, so even if your show is depicting a white family, your staff doesn't have to be all white, and vice versa. It's just like talent is talent, so let talented people try.

Jamie Broadnax: Thank you so much, Amy. This is great. Can you tell our listeners where they can find you on the internet and your social media shout-outs?

Amy Aniobi: Sure, of course, yeah. You can follow me on Twitter and Instagram, both are the same: JAniobi. The J is for my middle name, Josephine, and the last name is A-N-I-O-B as in boy-I, and yeah, I live tweet with the other writers Insecure every Sunday, and then Instagram is just mostly photos of black love and my friends killing it, so if you like that, then you can follow me there too.

Jamie Broadnax: Thank you, Amy.

Amy Aniobi: Thank you so much.

Jamie Broadnax: Thanks again to Amy for joining us, and we hope you enjoyed our two-part series discussing television about black women written by black women. Our first season of Get it Right is winding down, so make sure you leave us reviews and ratings in your podcast app of choice. It will help us make season two even better, but we're not done yet. Join us next week as we discuss one of the most progressive comics on the market today, Jem and the Holograms. Yeah, you heard me, and it's creators will blow your mind, so hug a loved one and enjoy a TV show, movie, comic or song that makes you happy.

Get it Right is hosted by me, Jamie Broadnax. The show is produced by Marc Faletti, Rewire's director of multimedia. Editorial input is provided by senior reporter, Jen Stanley, and oversight by Jodie Jacobson, Rewire's president and editor-in-chief.

