

A Seriously Funny Christian

Anita Renfroe makes women laugh, but also empowers them by pointing them to a faith that transforms lives.

By Marc de Chazal

ANITA RENFROE IS "ROUND AND SOFT, loves butter, carbs and sugar and worries routinely about her weight", according to *New York Times* writer Mimi Swartz. She is also "maternal to just about everyone, even people she doesn't know very well. She pinches pennies and

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worries that her spotless house isn't clean enough."

Anita, a forty-something American former stay-at-home mom who home-schooled her kids for a while, has in ten years risen from relative obscurity to massive popularity as a Christian comedienne. If you are one of the twelve million people who have seen her YouTube clip she calls 'Total Momsense', you'll know exactly why this woman gets inside moms of all ages. The grainy film features a somewhat ordinary looking woman of indeterminate age with longish red hair who is wearing glasses, slacks and a leather jacket. She stands on a stage next to a piano and grasps a microphone, explains that she will condense into 2 minutes and 55 seconds "what a mom would say in a 24-hour period", then asks her audience to "strap on your seatbelt" before she launches into the hysterical song at breakneck speed. It's funny and gets standing ovations from appreciative

audiences all over the place, soon to include women in Cape Town and Johannesburg at the Beauty for Ashes women's conferences.

TOTAL MOMSENSE

It's been a wild decade, but Anita Renfroe doesn't mind. With her unique brand of 'estrogen-flavoured' musical comedy and blend of sass, edge and slightly offbeat takes on All Things Female, audiences would say that Anita just tells it like it is. Some would say she just says what everyone else is thinking, but won't say out loud.

"I'd rather people laugh because they relate to something I say than because I wrote a clever punchline," Anita says. "All my stuff is about my life – it's real and it connects people – and that's a wonderful thing."

Anita's kids, who are all grown up, urged her to post the now-famous YouTube clip on Mothers Day. She did, and promptly forgot about it. "I thought it would be a nice thing to do," she says. "I thought maybe 1 000 people might see it."

That weekend, the clip got only 500 hits. But it quickly reached 800 000. Then the blogosphere got hold of it and "it went bazooka", to use Anita's words. In a few months it rose to 8 million hits. "That's impressive until you realise that the guy who eats live locusts has, like, 12 million hits," she says. But when something like this goes 'viral' and millions of people get to glimpse your comedy routine, your career is going to go through the roof as well – and that certainly seems to be the way it's gone for Anita Renfroe. Since the YouTube splash, the woman who was once a small-town pastor's wife is selling out large halls and arena venues months in advance.

Such a rise to fame doesn't come without pressure, no matter how good you are at cracking people up and helping them deal with their issues and grow closer to God at the same time. Anita Renfroe is clearly a professional

when it comes to engaging with women's hearts and delivering her message in a hysterical package. "But I do feel a bit of pressure," she confesses. This is understandable, comments writer Mimi Swartz, given the challenge she faces as her comedy goes mainstream: proving that being a Christian comedian is not an oxymoron.

INSANELY HILARIOUS

Anita has been part of the largest women's conference in the US, called Women of Faith, which brought her comedic ministry to 400 000 women in 2007. At these large single-gender gatherings, the other speakers, including Carol Kent – who will also be a guest speaker at this year's Beauty for Ashes conferences – tap into the feminine pain bottled up in so many women's hearts. They also tend to uncork the pain in fountains of tears. By the time Anita comes on, some comedic relief is perhaps exactly what the doctor ordered. She knows precisely what the mostly white, middle-class, middle-aged, faith-based American women at these conferences find funny. What woman who fits that demographic doesn't know what it's like to undergo a mammogram? Renfroe pretends to scoop one enormous breast into the X-ray machine. "The nurse wants you to laaay it up on the altar ... just laaaay it on the altar, whatever you have. For some of you bigger girls, it's like too much waffle mix in the waffle iron," she tells the laughing audience.

And then she gets round to praising her husband, John, who was for many years an administrative pastor in Southern Baptist churches, before he eventually joined her on the road to help with the administrative aspects of her ministry. She confesses to the crowd, "It was easier for me to submit myself to him when I was younger and thinner ... But then I got older and gained weight, and it's harder for me to submit to him. Because basically I think I can take him."

The women Anita is speaking to in



GREAT GIVEAWAY!

We're giving away ten free copies of Anita Renfroe's *Total Momsense* DVD, compliments of Beauty for Ashes and Today Magazine. This comedy concert features the songs 'William Tell Momisms' (aka 'The Mom Song'), 'Do What You Want To Do', 'Don't Breathe' and 'The Journey' ('the Botox Song'), plus an hour of hilarious stand up! Please send your details to Today/Total Momsense giveaway, PO Box 100, Century City, 7446 or fax 021 555 1508 or e-mail info@todaypublication.com with 'Today/Total Momsense giveaway' in the subject line. Closing date: 29 April 2008

these conferences, if they've been part of the broader evangelical Christian community for any length of time, have more than likely been encouraged to find joy in striving for perfection before God and man. Anita pushes something new before them. "Some of us are not trying to play it like we've got it all together and have risen above the fray. The celebration factor comes in when it dawns on you that you don't have to lug guilt and shame around your whole life," she explains. And that's what she leaves her audience with – "Each day you have a choice – hilarity or insanity."

EMPOWERING COMEDY

It may appear to some that Anita Renfroe is successful largely because of the feminist movement, especially when she is urging less successful women to embrace their lives and refuse to be defeated. But Renfroe says her goals are different – she prefers to speak about empowerment.

"I think it depends on what you are empowering them toward," she says. "If it is just to believe in themselves more, then it's pretty much like any other navel-gazing activity – you know, the kind where you get a really clean navel but don't really get anywhere. I heard someone say that it's like trying to steer your ship by looking at the deck instead of the stars. I think the difference with Women of Faith is that we are telling the stories of our glaring humanity and we are pointing women to a source of power outside themselves, toward a faith that has not only informed our lives but transformed them."

Renfroe finds a lot of her material from her daily life, such as her curiosity with gadgets which can easily become ten minutes of comedy, she says. The disappointments of modern life, especially modern women, is a major




Anita and her husband, John

thread running through her comedy. And this is why she loves performing before female audiences. "I think there are some things you probably shouldn't talk about in front of guys, but when it's just women, there are no holds barred. I don't man-bash. I just think it's more fun in a single-gender room because you can explore more freely," she says.

Her comedy deals with real life; it's for real women. But it's not about fixing every problem. "Here is the liberating truth," she writes in one of her books, *If It's Not One Thing, It's Your Mother*, "Everything is not going to get fixed and healed in this lifetime. That's what Heaven is for."

When Anita was just two years old, her father abandoned her mother. "When my biological father abandoned us, my mother was broken. That was back in 1964, and divorce still had a huge stigma attached to it. We were in the small town she grew up in, so it was very difficult for her." Anita would sing to her mother to cheer her up. "Maybe I saw that singing brought joy to her, because singing always brought me joy. I knew I felt connected with her. We would sing together."

But the faith culture she grew up in "wasn't so fond of funny. It was all about what you couldn't do. Really it was just a whole lot of rules and regulations. We certainly knew our Bible, but we weren't too happy about it. Although I always had this party going on in my head, I never knew it was okay to let it out," she says. The lid finally did come off, and the party is on!

In her *New York Times* article on Renfroe, Swartz comments that Christian comics must ultimately decide how they will define themselves – as Christians who happen to do comedy or as comics who happen to be Christian. Renfroe seems to be in the middle of this comedic club. "Christian is who I am; funny is what I do," says the woman who relates so well to other mothers, says things most women think but don't say, and basically is just someone other women would love to have as a best friend. 

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Award-winning Christian comedienne, Anita Renfroe, recently posted her song Total Momsense on both You Tube and Yahoo and has had a total of twelve million hits...and still counting! Her messages will resonate with you, engage your heart, and supply truth in one vibrant, hilarious package.



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