

His look has a lot in common with his music. His dexterous wit and weirdo sensibility got him quickly anointed as the golden boy of Latin trap—a genre in which Dominican, Puerto Rican, and other Latin-American artists have re-imagined the rap sounds pioneered in Atlanta. But today Bad Bunny is much more than the face of a once polemic genre; he's now one of the foremost global ambassadors for música urbana, the catchall label used to describe Spanish-language hip-hop, reggaeton, and other styles. In 2018, urbano was—far and away—the most viewed genre on YouTube. Of the platform's ten most popular music videos, eight were created by, or featured, urbano artists. And notably, Bad Bunny appeared on the No. 1 track.

Naturally, it was only a matter of time before U.S. artists, eager to tap into the movement and attract new audiences, came flocking. They've found a willing creative partner in Bad Bunny, who's been more than happy to provide his full-throated baritone to radio smashers and remixes the world over.

Last year he collaborated on English-language hits with the likes of Cardi B (“I Like It”), Drake (“Mia”), and a slew of others. In fact, Bad Bunny has lately appeared so often, on so many of the world's biggest songs, that it seems almost impossible that his own first full-length album appeared only this past December.

The album, called *X100PRE* (meaning “por siempre,” or “forever” in English), dropped on Christmas Eve and included everything from ukulele riffs to emo-rap missives to mutant trapchata beats. For listeners who had largely known him for his club and radio hits, the album might have seemed like a departure, like a grand and experimental statement. “I was super

prepared for that first impact and for people to be confused,” he says. “But just as I was prepared, I had a lot of faith that, in the end, people would understand me.”

And it seems they did: *X100PRE* easily summited Billboard's Top Latin Albums chart, occupying the No. 1 spot for six weeks straight. “When I was making this record, they told me, ‘But we don't have a commercial track,’” he remembers. Of course, he says, he wasn't trying to fit in with the cookie-cutter songs on the radio. He wanted something new and different. “I've always said, ‘*Cabrón*, on radio stations, they play some *porquería* [trash] songs,’” he says. “You listen to the radio and all the songs sound the same, from 8 in the morning to 12.”

THE LAST TIME I met Benito, about a year and a half earlier, he was in a different place. He'd rolled up to our interview in clout goggles and a psychedelic floral Supreme long-sleeve tee. He was scarfing down slices of pepperoni pizza and boasting about all the collabs and remixes he had in the works with English-language artists. He had audacious plans. Sure enough, over the course of the next 12 months, he'd drop songs with a pantheon of major-label U.S. acts: Nicki Minaj, 21 Savage, Travis Scott, Future, Will Smith, Jennifer Lopez, and, of course, Drake and Cardi B.

Bad Bunny's ascent has been wild and rapid. Just three years ago, Benito was bagging groceries at a local Econo Supermarket in his home of Vega Baja. He'd been writing and making original music since he was 13, nurturing a deep appreciation of the elder statesmen of Puerto Rican rap and reggaeton such as Daddy Yankee and Vico C, but also studying the Latin American salsa vocalists and balladeers, like Héctor Lavoe and Juan Gabriel. It was a wellspring of influences that

shaped the versatile sentimentality of his own voice—he's capable of both wailing about the anguish of a broken heart and rapping viciously about stealing your girl.

Eventually, as a communications student at the University of Puerto Rico's Arecibo campus, he started uploading tracks to SoundCloud. The aforementioned “Diles” caught the ear of a prominent Puerto Rican producer and label head named DJ Luian, who helped kick an elaborate release plan into high gear. Soon Bad Bunny was dropping singles and videos on a near weekly basis to guarantee his omnipresence on YouTube and commandeer the platform's algorithm in Latin America.

In the quick years since, Bad Bunny's ever expanding position within the Latinx music industry has made him a major voice on a range of social issues, too. The week before we met in San Juan, Benito dropped a video for “Caro,” a cut from *X100PRE*, that mushroomed into the latest Bad Bunny–prompted conversation about gender identity and masculinity in the urbano world. The video featured a runway show starring a drag queen, as well as the Puerto Rican model Jazmyne Joy playing a female proxy for Bad Bunny, getting her nails painted, donning a pair of neon green sunglasses, and lounging on a Ferrari convertible. It was just the latest instance of Bad Bunny exploring femme aesthetics. Detractors have condemned him for promoting “sexual deviance,” but fans have showered him with praise for embracing gender fluidity and for speaking out—on everything from the virtues of women who don't shave their pubic hair, to the prejudices of a nail salon in Spain that refused him service, to homophobia in the urbano movement.

At times, the praise has verged on celebrity worship, the oh-so-common lingua franca of the Internet age, with fans portraying him as a “woke king” or a “feminist icon.” Considering the long history of artists around the world who have expanded the limits of masculine expression, and the queer pop stars who have challenged gender norms, Bad Bunny's manicures are only mildly transgressive. He gets that. “There's people that appreciate what I do; there's people that criticize it,” he says. “There's people who say, ‘Thank you for sticking up [for us], thank you for defending [this].’ There's others that say I'm an opportunist,” he says.

He's wary of having his work perceived as a colossal political gesture—but he's just as wary of not utilizing his voice on issues that matter. “If I were like other artists, I'd forget about what's happening and not say anything,” he says. In September he used a performance on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon* to denounce the federal response to Hurricane Maria. “More (text continued on page 104)

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