From Spanish to English to Spanish: How Shakira's VMA Performance Showcases the New Moment in Latin Music "Crossover"

Sounding Out! Authors

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Abstract

***This post is co-written by Petra Rivera-Rideau and Vanessa Díaz** DOI: https://doi.org/10.59350/y5qq4-zt290 On the night of September 12, Colombian pop star Shakira made history as the first predominantly Spanish-language artist to be honored as MTV's Video Vanguard at the Video Music Awards (VMAs). The award recognizes artists who have had a major and innovative impact on music

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Caribbean Studies, Chican@/Latin@ Studies, Diasporic Sound, Language



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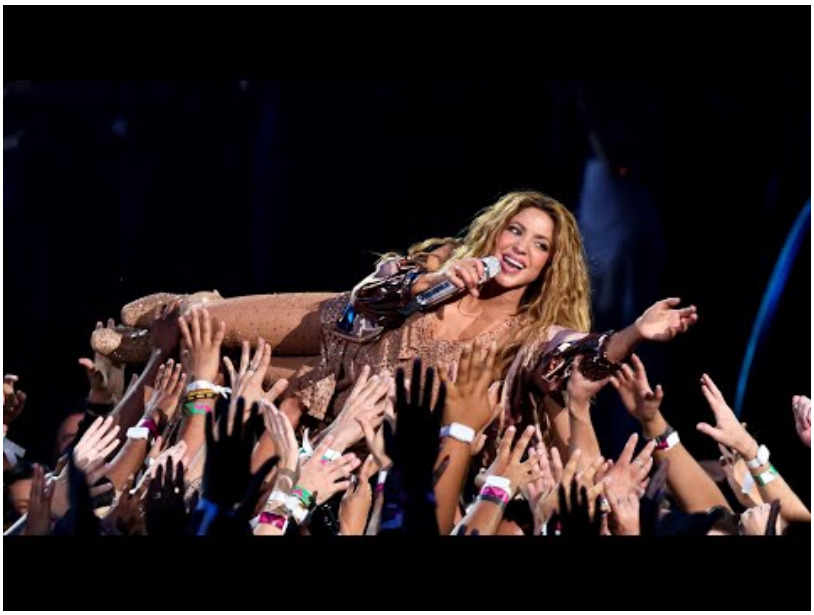
On the night of September 12, Colombian pop star Shakira made history as the first predominantly Spanish-language artist to be honored as MTV's Video Vanguard at the Video Music Awards (VMAs). The award recognizes artists who have had a major and innovative impact on music videos and popular music. Shakira played a 10-minute medley of Spanish and English hits from her three-decades long career. Her performance demonstrated her breadth as an artist as she shifted from pop to rock to reggaetón.

Not only did she demonstrate her impressive musical range, but of her 69 singles, Shakira selected those that represent two significant crossover moments for Latin music. She sang hits like "Wherever, Whenever," "Hips Don't Lie," and "She Wolf" from her English-language crossover in the early 2000s as part of the so-called "Latin Boom." She sang 2001's "Objection (Tango)" with the same samba/rock music arrangement she used at her very first VMA performance in 2002.



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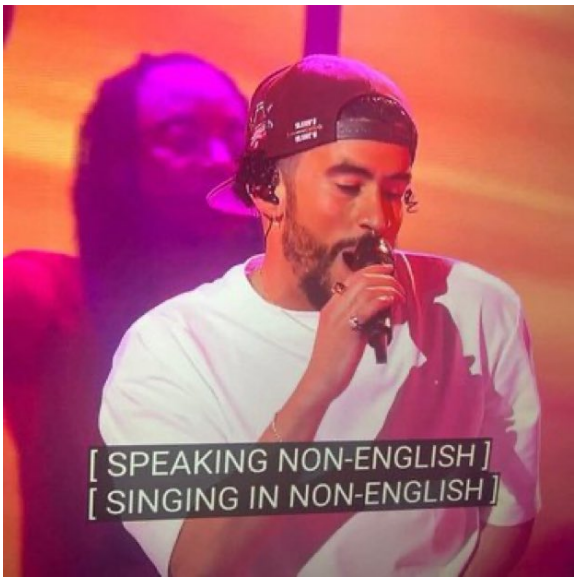
During this "Latin Boom" of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Shakira and other established Latin stars who had previously performed in Spanish, such as Ricky Martin, Marc Anthony, and the late Selena Quintanilla, dominated the charts with English-language albums. Despite their successful global careers in the Latin market—and the long history and influence of Latinx musicians in U.S. pop music–U.S. media consistently portrayed these artists as exotic newcomers to the scene, praised more for being "Latin lovers" than established musicians. The Latin boom stars were valued as spicy foreigners there to expose Americans to new, exotic Latin sounds – conga beats, flamenco-style guitar riffs, and festive horns – even as many of these songs draw from familiar rock/pop references. Draco Rosa, one Ricky Martin's co-writers, remembers "channeling [Jim] Morrison" and "elements of big band … a little bit of surf guitar" in the 1999 smash "Livin' La Vida Loca."



Despite the Latin Boom's English-language crossovers, the images and sounds associated with the moment underscored the artists' foreignness, something that continues today. This year's Grammys' botched treatment of superstar Bad Bunny's performance and acceptance speech, in

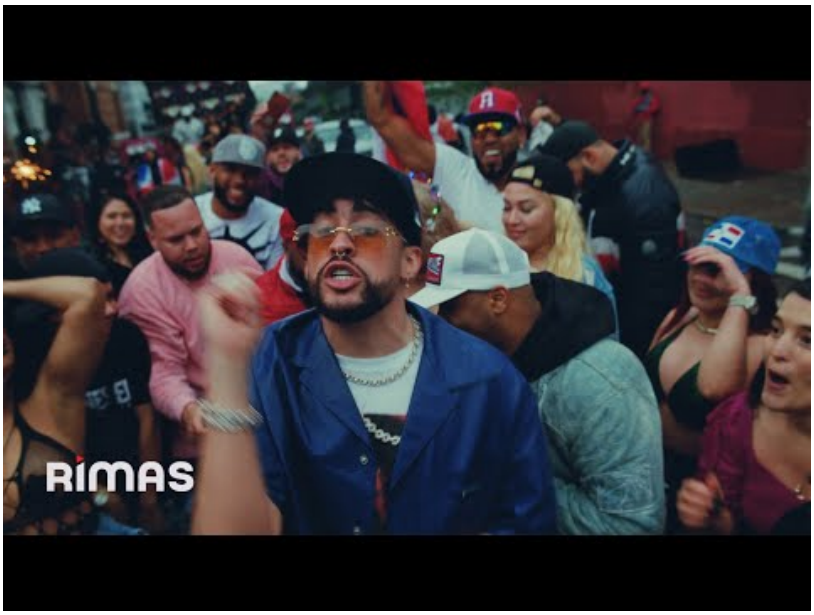
which, in lieu of translations, the subtitles merely declared that his words were "non-English." Spanish has long been used to signify Latinxs' alleged foreignness and inability to assimilate into US life and culture despite the fact that Latinx communities have been part of the fabric of the US for centuries. In the context of increased anti-immigrant sentiment, the popularity of Spanish-speaking artists like Bad Bunny and Shakira takes on even greater significance.

Following the Grammy's disastrous handling of Bad Bunny's performance and speech, backlash ensued. A plethora of popular memes and even t-shirts proudly claiming non-English popped up almost overnight. *New York Times*' critic and Princeton professor Yarimar Bonilla proclaimed that "Bad Bunny is [Winning in Non-English]." Celebrities from comedian Cristela Alonzo to rapper 50 Cent admonished CBS. Even California Congressman Robert Garcia sent a letter directly to the CBS president and CEO George Cheeks, writing that the incident "display[ed] a lack of sensitivity and foresight. For too many Spanish-speaking Americans, it felt disrespectful of our place in our shared society, and of our contributions to our shared culture." CBS eventually released a tepid statement saying that their vendor was not adequately equipped to manage Benito's Spanish-language speech and performance, and Cheeks took "full responsibility" for the incident. Overall, the Grammys snafu reflects the ways in which the American mainstream still is incapable of embracing the status of Latin artists as equal players in the US and global music markets, in any language.

Compared to this year's Grammys, however, MTV's VMAs offered a much more inclusive approach, with a historic perspective that demonstrated exactly how we were able to arrive at this new moment in Latin music. When Puerto Rican and Cuban American rapper Fat Joe and Mexican pop star Thalia presented the award for Best Latin video, Thalia reminded the audience that "in the 2000s' first Latin explosion, we had a song together, and now we're here celebrating again this new Latin explosion." This new Latin explosion refers to the numerous Spanish-language artists like Shakira, Bad Bunny, Karol G, and Peso Pluma who have recently broken out in the US mainstream.

https://youtu.be/NCOJEnZEmAo

But, unlike the previous Latin Boom, these artists have maintained their Spanish and their musical style. Bad Bunny's Grammy performance included plena, reggaeton, and merengue rather than the kitschy styles of his Latin Boom predecessors. In addition to selling out stadiums around the country, Karol G drew 15,000 fans, the largest crowd in the *Today Show*'s history, for her reggaetón performance as part of the program's Summer Concert Series in Rockefeller Center. Just this past September, Eslabon Armado became the first Mexican regional music group to ever perform on *Good Morning America* with their chart-topping hit "Ella Baila Sola" (the first Mexican regional song to ever hit number one on *Billboard*'s Global 200 chart). Whether it is the percussive dembow beat of reggaetón or the syncopated horns of corridos tumbados, all of these musicians have maintained the sounds of their respective genres, foregoing the stereotypical "Latin" sonic signifiers historically associated with Latin music.



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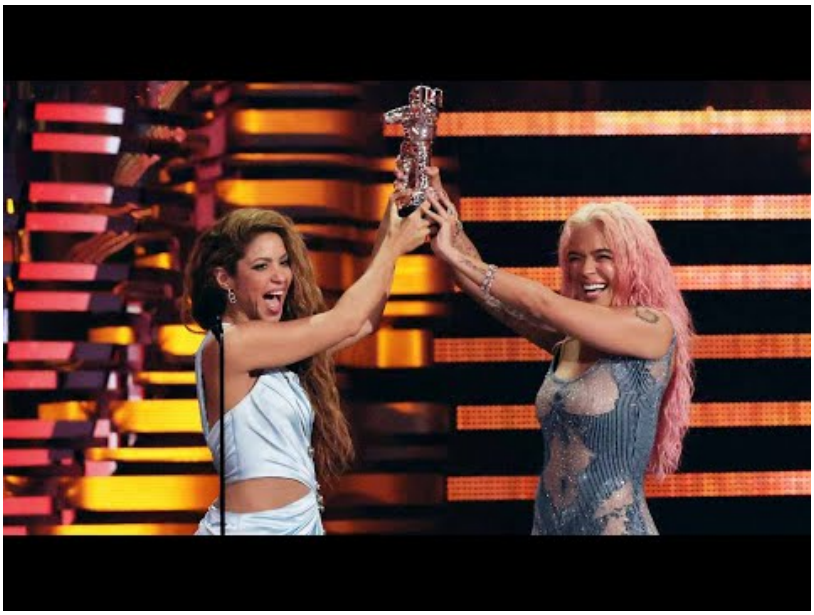
Shakira herself reflected this moment in her Video Vanguard performance. She performed her new Spanish-language songs as 2022's "Te Felicito," and 2023's "TQG" and "Bzrp Music Sessions: Volume 53" (the latter having broken four Guinness world records, including the most streamed Latin track in 24 hours). All of these songs have been part of this new Latin music movement. In fact, her "TQG" collaborator Karol G also performed her Spanish hits at the show. Mexican regional phenom Peso Pluma sang "Lady Gaga" on a small stage, surrounded only by his band, and called out "¡arriba México!" at the end. Brazilian artist Anitta performed a multilingual medley from her *Funk Generation: A Favela Love Story*. In addition, Shakira and Karol G won the award for best collaboration for "TQG." Not only did the women give their acceptance speech in Spanish, shouting out their home country of Colombia, but they also won in a category otherwise populated by mainstream English-language artists like Doja Cat with Post Malone, and Metro Boomin with The Weeknd, 21 Savage, and Diddy. The interchangeable, tropical Latinidad of the earlier Latin boom was replaced with shout outs to specific countries and regions, and the crowd proudly waved Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Colombian flags. At the VMAs, Latin musicians were not isolated in Latin awards categories or depicted as exotic novelties. They were central to the show – nominated for major awards, and celebrated for some of the night's most memorable performances.

https://youtu.be/y52O69VCOR4

Much like this year's Coachella, which featured Bad Bunny and K-Pop sensation Black Pink as headliners, this year's VMAs reflects a more global approach to pop music. Tuesday night's award show also featured two performances by K-Pop groups, and MTV offered its first ever award in Best Afrobeats. In this context, it makes sense that Latin music would have a significant presence in the program. But the dominance of Latin music right now makes it so that no part of the music industry can leave Latin music out anymore. Not the VMAs, not the Grammys, not Coachella. As Thalia proudly declared on stage, "this last year for the first time in the US Latin music made a billion dollars in streaming." Bad Bunny has been the most streamed artist on Spotify for three years in a row, has the longest-running Spanish-language album at the top of the Billboard chart,

and in 2022 became the only artist in history to stage two separate $100 million-grossing tours in less than 12 months. Karol G became the first woman to have a Spanish-language debut at number one, and came to the VMAs after a string of historic performances at her Mañana Será Bonito stadium tour. Latin music's global appeal is undeniable and the industry has to respond accordingly.



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This is among the most important times in history for Latin music, and honoring artists like Shakira center stage at the VMAs helps underscore the musical evolution we are lucky enough to witness. Twenty years ago, Shakira had to crossover into the US market in English; now she performs in her native Spanish and is more relevant than ever. The global success of stars like Peso Pluma, Karol G, and Bad Bunny means we need to completely reevaluate the concept of the crossover. Latin artists today did not crossover, the market crossed over into them. They are not compromising their language, their identity, or their culture. They do not have to kowtow to industry expectations that they perform the exotic, sexy Latin other. So while the VMA Vanguard Award winner Shakira may have had to crossover into English to make it during the '90s Latin boom, she can proudly return to her roots and, this time, the market will follow her.

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Featured Image: Screen shot by SO! from Shakira's MTV 2023 Video Vanguard acceptance speech

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