

Why the Music Business Is Betting Big on Bilingual Tracks

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Kevin Mazur/Getty Images

J Balvin & Cardi B

Barely one minute into “Sangria Wine,” her new single with Pharrell Williams, Cuban-American Camila Cabello launches into a verse in Spanish. And in “I Like It,” Cardi B’s reimagining of the classic 1967 boogaloo track, J Balvin spits his rhymes *en español*, while Bad Bunny mixes a little English into his mostly Spanish bit.

Both songs are on the Billboard Hot 100 -- “I Like It” at No. 19, “Sangria Wine” just entering the chart at No. 83 for the chart dated June 2 -- and both are performed by lead artists who didn’t rise to fame performing music in Spanish.

Historically, bilingual tracks almost exclusively have been the realm of remixes or bilingual versions of Spanish hits; even the bilingual renditions of “Despacito” and “Mi Gente” are remixes. But now, for perhaps the first time ever, songs conceived as bilingual from the onset are flooding the market. The ice was broken in 2017 with “Échame la Culpa,” with Demi Lovato and Luis Fonsi singing in both

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languages. This year, a slew of tracks have followed, including Sofia Reyes' "1, 2, 3," featuring Jason Derulo and De La Ghetto; Liam Payne and Balvin's "Familiar"; Jennifer Lopez's "Dinero" with Cardi B and DJ Khaled; and Maluma's "La Ex," which also features Derulo.

"We are looking for bilingual songs. Not aggressively, but if they happen as part of the artistic process, it's something we definitely embrace," says **Horacio Rodriguez**, senior vp marketing for Universal Music Latin Entertainment. "This is the post-'Despacito'/'Mi Gente' era, and there is a certain level of acceptance in the mainstream that didn't exist. A Latin artist singing in Spanish and English reflects the U.S. Hispanic reality."

The coexistence of Spanish and English in pop music is, of course, not new. In the 1990s, Marc Anthony, Shakira, Gloria Estefan and Lopez all routinely flipped tongues when performing for different audiences, and still do. But mixing languages on the same track has always risked alienating one fan base or the other, and until streaming came along, radio programmers were hesitant about playing such songs for fear that listeners would switch the dial as soon as the lyrics sounded foreign. "But the world is smaller with streaming," says **Gaby Martinez**, GM of Warner Music Latin and senior vp at Warner Music Latin America. "Now it's a no-brainer."

Hurdles remain, though. "It's the post-'Despacito' dilemma," says "Despacito" and "Échame" co-producer **Andres Torres**. "How to make songs in Spanish and English that don't sound like a marketing ploy. Writing a song in English and inserting words like *amor* or *corazón* is tough."

Jorge Fonseca, A&R director for Sony Music Latin, says that "the process has to be natural," as it was for Maluma's "La Ex," featuring Derulo singing in English. To date, all of the successful bilingual tracks have been collaborations.

Balvin, who prefers to sing in Spanish, says although there are "a lot of bilingual songs" out currently, he's proud of his own. "'I Like It' is the one that's killing it," he says. "It's a balance, but it's also the right collab. Me and Bad Bunny are really looking for the culture. I'm not saying the other ones aren't, but we have the same concept and aesthetics."

This article originally appeared in the June 2 issue of Billboard.



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