

Opinion: Why the Backlash Against Bad Bunny's Super Bowl Performance Misses the Point

By Johnnie R. S. McKnight

Who is Bad Bunny, and why are so many people upset about him headlining this year's Super Bowl halftime show?

To answer that question honestly, we need to start with who is actually responsible for booking the halftime show. Contrary to popular belief, it isn't the NFL. Since 2019, that responsibility has belonged to Roc Nation, the entertainment and cultural powerhouse founded by Jay-Z.

And that context matters.

Jay-Z isn't just a rapper. As he famously reminded us years ago, "*I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man.*" That line wasn't bravado, it was a blueprint. He isn't simply someone who builds companies; he himself is an institution. From Rocawear (sold for \$204 million in 2007 before he repurchased its intellectual property in 2019) to the 40/40 Club; from Armand de Brignac Champagne (half sold to LVMH in 2021) to D'USSÉ Cognac (majority sold to Bacardi in 2023), Jay-Z's fingerprints are etched into global culture. Add Roc Nation Sports, the Made in America Festival, and early investments in Uber and Block, and you don't just see a mogul, you see someone who curates movements, not moments.

So when Roc Nation selects a halftime performer, it's never accidental. It's intentional. Each choice reflects where culture is, and where it's going.

Enter Bad Bunny

I first began writing this piece back in October, when it was announced that Bad Bunny would headline the Super Bowl. Since then, the moment has only grown more consequential.

Bad Bunny, born Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, isn't just one of the most successful Puerto Rican artists of all time; he's one of the most influential artists, period. He was the most-streamed artist on Spotify globally for three consecutive years. His album *Un Verano Sin Ti* became the most-streamed album in the world and the first Spanish-language album to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard 200. He's won multiple Grammy and Latin Grammy Awards, all while refusing to compromise his language, identity, or roots.

He has done all of this while singing exclusively in Spanish, not as a novelty, but as a declaration.

Bad Bunny's music spans reggaeton, trap, bachata, and salsa, but his influence goes far beyond sound. He's used his platform to advocate for Puerto Rico, protest corruption, challenge

gender violence, and speak openly about colonial neglect. He became the first Latin artist to grace the cover of *Rolling Stone*. He's crossed into film, fashion, professional wrestling, and hosted *Saturday Night Live*, expanding what global stardom looks like for a Latino artist.

And yet, it's precisely this visibility that has unsettled some people.

The Real Discomfort

Let's be clear: much of the backlash surrounding Bad Bunny's Super Bowl performance isn't about music, it's about language, identity, and power.

Some critics argue that his music being predominantly in Spanish makes him unsuitable for "America's biggest stage." That argument collapses under even minimal scrutiny. There are more than 68 million Latinos living in the United States today. In cities like Springfield, Massachusetts, nearly 46% of the population identifies as Latino. This isn't a future demographic shift, it's the present.

America's strength has always been its diversity of people, ideas, and cultures. I learned that early, attending school in Amherst, Massachusetts, a true melting pot. One of my closest friends arrived in our schools as a Bosnian refugee fleeing civil war. Today, he's a husband, father, homeowner, and lawyer. That's the American promise realized, when fear doesn't dictate belonging.

Culture Meets Politics

Since October, Bad Bunny hasn't just released music, he's spoken out forcefully about the direction of this administration, particularly its treatment of undocumented people, families, and protesters. We are witnessing aggressive immigration enforcement practices that critics say raise serious questions about accountability, due process, and the safety of even American-born citizens.

This didn't happen in a vacuum.

During the first 2020 presidential debate, Donald Trump told the far-right extremist group the Proud Boys to "stand back and stand by." Many Americans interpreted that moment not as a rebuke, but as a signal, a promise deferred. Wait until I'm elected, and then I'll empower you.

That promise, many would argue, has now been fulfilled.

We are watching an administration embolden the most dangerous instincts of enforcement culture, deputizing fear and cruelty under the banner of order, disproportionately impacting Black and brown communities. Against that backdrop, Bad Bunny's decision to hold a residency in Puerto Rico, deliberately channeling tourism dollars back into the island's economy, takes on deeper meaning. So do concerns that some of his fans could be targeted simply for showing up.

Just as the Civil Rights Movement once forced America to confront its conscience, this moment demands the same moral clarity. Movements are never comfortable while they're happening, only in hindsight do we pretend they were inevitable. The American public needs to ask itself a hard but necessary question: what side of history do you want to be on? Do you want to be remembered among those who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, risking everything for justice, or among those who stood silently in town squares, watching cruelty unfold and calling it order?

History has never been neutral. And neither is this moment.

A Stage Bigger Than Football

NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has expressed hope that the halftime show won't be "overly political." But history suggests otherwise.

Music has always moved hearts before laws followed. From Marvin Gaye urging the nation to reflect with *What's Going On*, to Bob Dylan confronting the machinery of violence in *Masters of War*, artists have never been neutral observers of American life. They have always taken a stance, challenging U.S. policy, questioning power, and filling moral voids when politics failed to rise to the moment.

Bad Bunny steps onto that same lineage, not as an outlier, but as a continuation of a long American tradition where music becomes conscience and culture becomes catalyst.

While most artists avoid politics, there are moments when certain artists rise to meet the times, and in doing so, reshape how young people see the world. Music has consistently pushed America forward when politics stalled. I don't expect this moment to be any different.

Some conservatives are already promoting alternatives to the halftime show. But the truth is simple: most people will be watching Bad Bunny. They'll be leaning forward, waiting to see what he does, what he says, and what he represents.

I didn't make it to Puerto Rico to witness his residency firsthand, but everyone I know who did said it was electric, a celebration of culture, pride, and purpose. If that same spirit shows up on Super Bowl Sunday, it won't just be entertainment.

It will be a mirror.

If you can't get behind that, you're free to change the channel. The NFL has already done the math. Culture is moving, with or without permission.

I know where I'll be.