



How Rolling Stone's Suzy Exposito Made History with Her Bad Bunny Cover Story

First, she planted the seed of the idea in his publicist's mind. Then she began a relentless insider campaign to convince magazine editors that the megastar was cover worthy. Then she and the art director recruited the singer's talented artist girlfriend to shoot it in their pandemic hideaway. The details of it all had Alicia on the edge of her seat

Alicia Menendez:

If you've seen the recent issue of Rolling Stone, then you know that Bad Bunny made history as the first Latin urban music artist to grace the cover of the iconic magazine. And behind that glossy image are three Latinas who made it happen. Suzy Exposito, the magazine's Latin music editor, wrote the cover story. She plotted for months with Bad Bunny's publicist, Sujeylee Sola, to make it happen. And Gabriela Berlingeri, a jewelry designer and Benito's girlfriend, shot the cover on her iPhone in the middle of a pandemic. This is the story of how these fierce Latinas made magazine history.

First of all, congratulations. This is a huge deal.

Suzy Exposito: Thank you.

Menendez: You're welcome.

Exposito: Thank you so much.

Menendez: And I'm glad that you seem like you are processing that it's a big deal.

Exposito: Still processing. Yep. It's wild. It's just wild.

Menendez: I feel like I am constantly pitching celebrities and publicists, so let me ask you before we even get into the making of this, how were you able to score an interview with Bad Bunny?

Exposito: Luckily, I had interviewed him before. I interviewed him at the Latin Grammys in 2018, and I seem to have caught him at a time where he was definitely making it big in the Latin space, but had just started to crack the anglophone market, and I went to the Latin Grammys and figured, "You know what, this is like where I'm gonna find him." Generally, Bad Bunny is a bit of an elusive chanteuse, so he... To quote Mariah Carey. He doesn't like doing very many interviews, and at the time, I got like maybe 15, 20 minutes with him. Honestly, he's just such a freak, and I love it.

I feel like Latin music has been sorely lacking in legit freaks, and I mean I'm someone who would describe myself as a freak. By that I mean people who are not afraid to try new things, people who aren't afraid of breaking ground, who aren't afraid of experimenting, whether it's like... You know, like Bad Bunny, I think it's in both his style, like personal style, and also in his music, and in the ideas that he shares. So, I kept in touch with the publicist, Sujeylee Sola, and I told her. I was like, "I really want him on the cover of Rolling Stone."

And she was like, “Okay, let me know how we can make that happen.” I was like, “Well, let me know the next time he’s putting out an album and we’ll start to work on it.”

I think just every time they would talk about the cover, I’d be like, “I think Bad Bunny’s gonna do something really big soon and we should be ready for it.” There was also the J. Lo and Shakira Super Bowl coming up. I didn’t know he was gonna be performing with them, but I suspected, because he did that song with J. Lo before. Hmm. He might be one of their surprised guests. And then he appeared, just like swathed in Swarovski crystals, and so I went back to my bosses and I was like, “Look, this dude. He’s blowing up. He performed for the biggest, most mainstream television audience in the United States. At this point, like come on.” And they were like, “Okay, let’s talk about it.”

So, I talked to Sujeylee and I was like, “I think we need to make an impression.” And she was like, “Okay. He’s gonna be on Fallon. Why don’t we stop by your office?” I was like, “Stop by the office. Bring a few of the songs. I’m going to invite my editors, and then they can hear the music and chat with him a little bit.” And so, he came to the office, and I only invited maybe six or seven people, and within like two songs, the office just filled up with people. Once they realized that Bad Bunny was in the office, it went from like 10 people to like 50, 60 people crowded into the conference room, just listening to his music. He played us a few songs, and people were super stoked. I mean, the energy in the room was just like so... It was just like dynamite, you know? People were dancing, and kind of grooving with it. My editors were like, “All right. We can see the appeal.”

You know, and he’s so charismatic, even for people who don’t speak Spanish. His charisma just shines through.

Menendez: It’s apparent. Yeah.

Exposito: They were like, “All right. Let’s do a cover.” That’s how it happened.

Menendez: How did Gabriela Berlinger get to shoot the cover?

Exposito: Oh, it was an idea our creative director had. We couldn’t fly anybody there, so Katrina was like, “Well, why don’t we ask Bad Bunny if there’s anyone within close proximity to him who might be able to take some nice photos?” And Gabriela, like she’d already taken photos for him. A lot of the photos that you saw in his Instagram, I mean, over the past like three years, she’s taken those photos. They’ve been dating for three years and he hadn’t gone public with her, and I didn’t go into this in the story. A lot of people, they say nasty things about people’s partners, especially because she’s a civilian. She’s not involved in any of this. She’s not a celebrity. And so, he kind of wanted to protect her.

But of course, in quarantine, it became apparent that he had someone there with him, and who better to photograph him than the woman who’s been secretly photographing him this entire time, at least like his ascent. And so, she took amazing photos. She really did. And she did it with an iPhone, which I love.

Menendez: Did it add an element, then, to also be able to have the first Latina shoot a cover for Rolling Stone?

Exposito: Yes. Absolutely. I mean, I, and I don’t think I’m going to get in trouble for saying this, because it’s a fact. Most of the people who shoot covers, and it’s not just at Rolling Stone, but it’s across the board in print journalism, most of them are men. And like, I think it’s amazing in a way how this worked out. At first, we were so scared. We were like, “Oh my God. Are we gonna even make this happen? Are we gonna have to shoot this cover over

Zoom?” Like what? I just really love that Gabby agreed to do this, and she knocked it out of the park. I’m really proud of her. And Benito’s really proud of her, too. I told him in an interview. I was like, “Did you know that your girlfriend is gonna be the first Latina to shoot a cover?” And he was like, “¿Queeeeé?” He was like, “Wow!” He was so proud of her. And he didn’t take any credit for it at all. It’s not like he was like, “Oh yeah, she could only do it because of me.” He was like, “She is talented,” and he wants people to see that.

He was just thrilled to kind of like push her into the spotlight a bit.

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Menendez: What was the biggest hurdle?

Exposito: I think the biggest hurdle really was like my own insecurity going into it. This is my first cover story, and honestly-

Menendez: No pressure.

Exposito: I was like, “Just my luck. I land my first cover story during a pandemic, like seriously?” It’s like that was what I thought, and I was so upset about it at first, because it was like, “Oh, this is gonna suck! It’s gonna be such an unremarkable cover story, because I’m gonna have to report it over video.” But I do think that as the story came along, as I worked on it with my editor, Christian Hoard, I mean, I think that he was really encouraging, and he was like, “Look, you’re in a really unique position. You are interviewing somebody in the middle of a pandemic, and you can’t see them, but in a way, this is going to humanize him in a way that very few people have been able to before. He’s just like the rest of us.”

Menendez: Yeah, the fact that he’s just eating chicken and potatoes somewhere, like that little detail to me, I was like, “Oh yeah, stars, they’re just like us.”

Exposito: Exactly, like he’s still trying to adhere to his diet, and getting bored, and angrily tweeting at the government, just like the rest of us. So, it was really funny, and I got to know him really well. It helped that I met him before in person, twice. It helped a lot. I think that because he was bored, and like in quarantine, he was like, “All right, I can talk to a new person. This is fine.” He usually does not like interviews.

Menendez: So, when you have someone who’s not a talker, what were you doing to draw him out?

Exposito: I think he turned into a talker. He was finally like, “All right. I’m gonna...” You know, the first time, I mean the first interview, I asked him some questions that were a little spicy. For example, like in his song, Yo Perreo Sola, he did not credit the female singer.

Menendez: Saw that.

Exposito: Like he usually would a featured artist. His rationale was that she didn’t write any of the parts to the song. He credited her as a songwriter, but not as a vocalist, which was interesting. But he said that she didn’t write the parts of the song, whereas all of his other guests wrote their own verses. But also, it was somewhat of a... It was like an experiment in his identity. He felt like he wanted a woman to sing these parts, and then for him to lip sync the parts in his music video as he did drag. That was sort of like an exploration into how he wants to present his femininity.

Menendez: What makes a good celebrity profile great?

Exposito: What I don’t like about some celebrity profiles is like the ones that come off like being a little too... There’s a word for it. Like ingratiating, or like deifying people in a way that it’s so smarmy to me. For me, I broke my own rule in this story, actually, because I usually don’t talk about myself at all in profiles. I think that that can kind of like kill the buzz a lot of the time. I don’t like when people start reflecting on their own lives in the middle of somebody else’s profile. I usually find it distracting. I think the point where I broke that rule was when I talked about disclosing to him like my sexuality, and I chose to-

Menendez: Because you identify as bi.

Exposito: I do identify as bisexual, yeah. And I have for the last 10 years, at least openly, and so, I chose to have this part of the conversation in a closet, because I’m still at my grandmother’s house, and that’s still something... It’s like a sore subject for my family. It just is. But at this point, I’m like 30 years old. I’m like, “What are y’all gonna do, ground me?”

Menendez: Well, yes, but you’re also hiding in a literal closet, so...

Exposito: Yeah. I had to really reckon with the fact that I’m still worried about making my family uncomfortable, and I think a lot of us still, a lot of us can be like what? Like 45, 60, and still never be able to really discuss that side of ourselves with our families. I have so many people in my family who are also queer, it’s just they don’t talk about it, you know? Every once in a while, somebody has a roommate. That’s like a common thing. Or somebody brings their friend to Christmas. You know, it’s coded, and that’s just how things are in my family and in so many other families.

I waited until I was in a serious relationship with a woman to come out, because at that point I was like... I don’t know. I knew how I felt for many years, but I didn’t even take it seriously until I was in a relationship. That’s when I came out to my mom. She was super supportive and really sweet about it. This would have been 10 years ago. And also, like anyone who is queer also knows that coming out is not... it’s not like a one and done kind of thing. You’ll spend like the rest of your life coming out over and over again, like I did in my article. That’s just like one of the many times.

Menendez: Well, and I also was so struck by an exchange that you had on Twitter, because in addition to interviewing Bad Bunny, you interviewed a whole milieu of celebrities, including Ricky Martin, and it evoked someone to respond that like there was always a lot of homophobia around Ricky Martin. It wasn’t just when he came out that he experienced that

homophobia, or that those of us who sort of knew about Ricky Martin were exposed to that. It was always there, and it was always a subject of conversation, and that that predates the coming out very often.

Exposito: Yes, it does. Like oftentimes, you'll get bullied for being any kind of queer. You'll get bullied for it many years before you even own up to it.

Menendez: Why did you choose to weave that into this story?

Exposito: It was something that I discussed with my editor, because it was like after I did that, like when I brought my computer into the closet, I was like... I was like, "I'm at my abuela's house, like I don't want her listening to this conversation." It's so funny and I love her so much, but she liked to listen to some of my interviews, for one, because I was speaking in Spanish, and that's kind of rare for my family. They don't really speak Spanish with me, so I think that she was kind of entertained by hearing me. And I was like, "Oh my God, I can't do this."

But then, when I thought about it a little bit more, I was like, "It is because I still can't talk about this around my family. I just... I can't." And what Bad Bunny did with his drag video, it was so powerful, because I really don't think... I mean, Ricky Martin is gay. I don't think Ricky Martin would have gotten away with that. I really don't. He presents as very masculine, and if he tried doing that, even this year, like if he tried to do that, would people really accept it? It's like I think to this day, people prefer gay men to be masculine, and straight passing or whatever. That's a very real thing.

So, for someone like Bad Bunny, who's in a very secure relationship with a woman, and who's the most popular rapper/singer in Latin America right now, and in the US, for someone like him to go out on a limb and dress in drag as like a show of solidarity with queer people, I was like, "He's doing this so I don't have to feel this way anymore." And so, that's when I decided to set the scene. We stayed in the closet for like an hour and just talked about... We just talked about gender, and sexuality, and like why he started caring about all this, because he really doesn't have to care. And the fact that he goes out there and says like, "I'm not okay with this," is unprecedented.

Menendez: Right, but I want to talk about you. I want to re-center this back on you.

Exposito: Okay.

Menendez: You clearly are a journalist, because you keep bringing it back to not you. Did you want to write about Latin music? Or did you just sort of back end your way into Latin music?

Exposito: I've always listened to Latin music. I can't really think of a time when I didn't. Because like you grow up around it, but also I enjoyed it. No, but like, I mean originally I came in punk. I came up, like I played in punk bands. That is my background. And I didn't feel totally confident writing about Latin music until I started working at MTV in 2013, and I specifically worked at MTV World, which was like the global music hub, and I just kind of organically started writing about Latin music there, because it seemed to be the most familiar to me. At least I knew who Maná was. I knew who Juanes was. I knew Daddy Yankee. Just kind of organically took that on and learned a lot about Latin music from that job.

So then, when I started at Rolling Stone, I was mostly reviewing a lot of indie rock, punk, and even R&B stuff, because I do love R&B, and I was reviewing records for the most part. And then I thought about it and I was like, "Man, there is not a lot of Latin coverage at

Rolling Stone, and I feel like they're kind of missing the boat." I started pitching more Latin artists in general. I started commissioning freelancers to write about it, too.

Menendez: You're also a musician, right?

Exposito: I am.

Menendez: Do you play an instrument, or...

Exposito: I haven't played an instrument in a while. Let's be real. But no, I used to play bass a lot more frequently, but I'm a singer primarily.

Menendez: Does that help you be a better music writer?

Exposito: Totally. Oh, totally. I think so. I really do. I think that it helps to know music, and to know what it takes to make music. It really helps me smell the bullshit sometimes. I'm like, "Man, you really don't write your own songs, do you?" There's sometimes I'm like, "All right, I see you." It's all in how somebody talks about their work, personally. But also, just talking about music in general, I think it helps. I taught at Girls Rock Camp for years. I'm talking like nine summers. I have been a band instructor for like nine summers and learned a lot about music that way. We do songwriting classes.

When you work at Girls Rock Camp, you get assigned a band. When you're a band coach, like I was. And we have to walk these girls through songwriting. What their energy is gonna be as a band, their band name, we walk through the whole process. And in a lot of ways, that helped me think more about the industry side of things. I'm like, "Oh, man. These people have to have conversations with their managers all the time. Okay, what is your brand?"

Menendez: You are the first Latina to write a cover story for Rolling Stone. What does that mean to you?

Exposito: It means everything. I've been at Rolling Stone full-time for almost five years, and it's not like I'm the only Latina who has ever worked at Rolling Stone. There have been many who came before me. Granted, there's only maybe like one or two of us in editorial at once, but it really means a lot that they gave me a chance to prove myself, in a way, and it wasn't just for me. It was for all the Latinos who've come through, and like wanted to represent themselves in the best way. And I think that what we do as a culture is pretty dope, and I think that it deserves recognition.

So, it's so much more than me. It's much bigger than me.

Menendez: Suzy, thank you. Thank you so much for doing this, and congratulations.

Exposito: Thank you so much, Alicia. This was... I appreciate you wanting to, you know, just shine a light on little old me. I'm used to being behind the scenes, so I really appreciate you wanting to talk to me about this story.

Menendez: This is awesome.

Menendez: Thank you as always for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Cedric Wilson is our sound designer. Emma Forbes is our assistant producer. Manuela Bedoya is our intern. We love hearing from you. Email us at hola@latinatolatina.com, and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please,

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