



J Balvin Tries to Become a Man in ‘The Boy From Medellín’

In an uninspiring doc, Reggaeton’s most apolitical star prepares for the biggest concert of his life

📅 May 20, 2021 👤 Michael Giltz

Reggaeton star J Balvin is bewildered. It’s 2018, and Balvin is about to stage his first solo stadium show in his hometown of Medellín, Colombia. This caps off a hugely successful tour cementing his spot among the biggest pop stars in the world. He’s done it all and he didn’t have to cross over, for Balvin sings mostly in Spanish. He’s done it by bringing the world to him. So why is the world suddenly mad at Balvin?

In the documentary film *The Boy From Medellín*, we’re a fly on the wall for the seven days leading up to that big show. Balvin is an open book in many ways, with a huge social media presence that’s vulnerable and honest. Balvin talks often about grappling with depression. He opens up about becoming grossly overweight when his career hit some snags. Not that there’s anything wrong with being big, Balvin hastens to add, but that’s just not who he is.

Unlike fellow superstar Bad Bunny, for example, Balvin isn’t terribly political. Bad Bunny was right in the mix when protests over a dickish governor engulfed his home of Puerto Rico. Bad Bunny collaborated on a song mocking the man that played no small part in rallying people to push for the governor’s removal.

Balvin isn’t without a stance or two. He dyed his hair to support Gay Pride in 2019. He led a petition to help people trapped at the border as Venezuela collapsed, a campaign dubbed #LatinosSomosFamilia (We Latinos Are Family). And his music is Coldplay-like in its positivity, with none of the usual tough guy swagger or misogyny of original reggaeton stars like Daddy Yankee. Teens can listen to Balvin but so can Grandma. He’s...sweet.

That may not be enough anymore. The movie opens with footage of Balvin performing in Mexico. He makes an offhanded comment on politics, saying he’s not for the left or the right but just for peace and love or some such thing. I winced at the naivete and minutes later Balvin is shocked to learn that people are upset over what he said. These days, you have to take sides.

It gets worse. Protests engulf Colombia during the Latin Spring. March after march roils the country, with more than one million people taking part at one point, shutting down roads and bridges. Other acts are forced to cancel their concerts and suddenly the crowning achievement of his career may not even happen. And even if it does, will anyone show up? For a guy so active on social media, his silence is deafening and fans are starting to call him out. Where’s J Balvin? Why isn’t he speaking up?

That’s the crux of the film. Balvin anguishes about what to say or do, not for any calculated commercial reason, but just because it’s...not his thing? When he finally posts an anodyne statement lamenting the death of a young protestor, that makes things worse. Balvin commented on the kid dying but not *why* he died. As Balvin himself says, the kid didn’t die, he was murdered by government forces. But what *should* he say?

The answer seems obvious, since he voices empathetic comments throughout the film. Say what you feel, J Balvin! But his desire not to offend combined with a certain humility that he’s not the best informed guy in the world makes it hard. Balvin will dye his hair with the words Peace and Love for his big show. He’s all for peace and love! Just don’t ask him how to achieve it.

The music makes J Balvin special. But since this concert comes at the end of the tour, we don’t see any of his creative process, no rehearsals, no set list, no song choices or the writing of new numbers, nothing more than glimpses of him in action.

What that leaves is his political crisis and something a little more interesting—the eco-system of a global star. When he goes to a local gym to workout, you think, really? Doesn’t he have a gym in his home? It seems more PR than a need to sweat. Celebrities at his level spend every day in lockdown because unless you want some publicity, the hassle of going to the store or the gym just isn’t worth it.

Balvin maps out his day in a meeting attended by his executive assistant, his personal assistant and another aide or two. His physical and mental health get a checkup from a personal physician and a personal psychiatrist. (Sadly, we don’t sit in on therapy sessions.) His soul gets a tune-up or two from a spiritual adviser. Family and friends attend parties to celebrate the upcoming show, though you realize his friends are almost all on the payroll.

When the political crisis gets worse and worse, in swoops manager Scooter Braun for a heart-to-heart that gives Balvin the confidence to speak up at the film’s climax.

You want to make fun of a celebrity opening up to the camera as he swims in his infinity pool with a glorious view of Medellín? Here’s your chance. You want to see Balvin meet privately with one of his online critics and then actually listen to the guy rather than argue with him? You can do that too. Fans will remain fans; hey, J Balvin has to pee during his four hour concerts just like anyone else! Those interested in the bubble world of a superstar will be mildly intrigued. But anyone looking to understand why he’s famous will be better off spinning his latest album *Colores*. Turns out a nice guy, even in crisis, doesn’t make for a very compelling movie.

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