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With 'Voodoo,' UMG Tests New Recipe For a Global Crossover

Indian rapper Badshah's collaboration with J Balvin reflects the challenges of the label's goal to break an artist from the country of 1.3 billion.

BY AMIT GURBAXANI



J Balvin (left) and Badshah Illustration by Matthew Hancock

UMBAI — Rapper-singer [Badshah \(https://www.billboard.com/artist/badshah/\)](https://www.billboard.com/artist/badshah/) is known in music circles outside India as the artist who claimed in 2019 to have broken [BTS \(https://www.billboard.com/artist/bts/\)](https://www.billboard.com/artist/bts/)' record for the most YouTube views in 24 hours — a boast the video streaming service [never verified \(https://www.billboard.com/pro/indian-rapper-badshah-video-one-day-youtube-record-sony/\)](https://www.billboard.com/pro/indian-rapper-badshah-video-one-day-youtube-record-sony/). Three years later, with Universal Music Group in his corner, he has his sights set on becoming India's biggest global crossover artist.

UMG and Badshah want to popularize Indian music globally with a genre they're calling Desi pop. (“Desi” is a colloquial Hindi word, considered offensive by some, meaning “from the country.”) They launched the quest in April with “Voodoo,” a cross-continental collaboration between Badshah and Latin artists [J Balvin \(https://www.billboard.com/artist/j-balvin/\)](https://www.billboard.com/artist/j-balvin/) and [Tainy \(https://www.billboard.com/artist/tainy/\)](https://www.billboard.com/artist/tainy/). Five months later, despite what the label called the most extensive marketing campaign for any of its Indian releases, “Voodoo” hasn't cracked *Billboard's* global charts or taken off as much as some involved had hoped.

The experiment highlights just how hard it is to create a crossover success from a country of enormous commercial potential for the music business. Although it has 1.3 billion people, India was the 17th-ranked music market in 2021, according to IFPI, with \$219 million in revenue.

UMG executives in India say the single is the beginning of a longer-term play to export Desi pop and the first in a series of collaborations between Badshah and other global artists. “We have opened the door, put our foot inside and gone to the first few rooms,” says **Devraj Sanyal**, managing director/CEO of Universal Music in India and South Asia.

The major labels' interest in India has grown as streaming has broken barriers and allowed acts from Asia, Latin America and Africa to chart in the United States like never before. Labels are pouring resources into new local offices in developing countries. Now, as India's streaming infrastructure has matured, they are looking for that crossover effect to pay off, both locally and globally. The appeal of the U.S. market is obvious, given that the country's blended per-

stream audio rate is \$0.0053, *Billboard* estimates, nearly four times the 10 paise (\$0.0014) rate in India.

Previous collaborations between Indian and international acts have generally struggled to gain traction outside of India. UMG tried before, in the mid-2010s, when Interscope signed actress **Priyanka Chopra** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/priyanka-chopra/>) to a record deal for her debut album. After Chopra's high-profile singles — including “In My City” (2012) with **will.i.am** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/will-i-am/>) and “Exotic” (2013) with **Pitbull** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/pitbull/>) — failed to crack the pop charts, the album was shelved.

Indian streaming service JioSaavn engineered similar pairings in 2019: “BIBA” by **Pritam** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/pritam/>) and **Marshmello** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/marshmello/>), “NY Se Mumbai” by rappers **Naezy** and **Divine** with **Nas** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/nas/>) and “Ahimsa” by **A. R. Rahman** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/a-r-rahman/>) and **U2** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/u2/>). Several more such collabs are in the works — electronic music producer **KSHMR** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/kshmr/>)'s next album, for example, is expected to have features from Indian rappers **Divine**, **MC Stan** and **Raja Kumari**.

Labels often release special versions of international hits with additional verses from Indian music stars, like a remix of **Ed Sheeran** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/ed-sheeran/>)'s “2Step” featuring **Armaan Malik** that Warner Music released in June. Though many of those singles were smashes in India, they didn't resonate much beyond the Indian diaspora, which numbers around 18 million, according to a 2021 United Nations report. The exception was Rahman's Academy Award-winning “Jai Ho”; a remix with **The Pussycat Dolls** (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/the-pussycat-dolls/>) hit the top 15 of the Billboard Hot 100 in 2009 after the worldwide success of *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Unlike Chopra, Malik (who is signed to Arista) or **Prateek Kuhad** (who has

inked a deal with Elektra), Badshah isn't attempting to be an English-language pop star. On "Voodoo," he raps and sings in Hinglish, a mix of Hindi and English, and Balvin rhymes in Spanish over Tainy's eerie synth and reggaeton beats.

Sanyal conceptualized "Voodoo" as a way to brand Desi pop. "Because there's K-Pop and J-Pop, people would have liked for us to call this I-Pop," says Sanyal. "But we felt the word 'desi' is very, very cool."

More than three years ago, he began pitching Universal Music Latin music and Iberian Peninsula chairman **Jesus Lopez** on the idea of a collaboration between an Indian and Spanish-language artist.

Last summer, when **UMG signed (<https://www.billboard.com/pro/badshah-universal-music-group-global-deal/>)** Badshah, who was previously with Sony Music India, Sanyal renewed his pitch to Lopez. Conversations soon focused on Balvin. He and Tainy worked on "Voodoo" remotely, and by the fall, the recording was ready. Its release was delayed because pandemic-related travel restrictions prevented Badshah from flying to the U.S. to shoot the video with Balvin, which they finally filmed in February.

For the April 22 release, Universal Music teams in every territory where the label is present made a "consolidated marketing effort to promote and push the song out as a priority," from playlisting to radio, says Sanyal.

In May, UMG chairman/CEO **Lucian Grainge** declared that "Voodoo" had "the biggest international audio streaming debut ever for an Indian artist" and touted the global debut of Desi pop. A remix by **Tiësto (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/tiesto/>)** followed that month, and in June, the label released a version featuring a verse by **Lil Baby (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/lil-baby/>)**.

EDM remixes and the addition of a hot rapper are familiar strategies; so, in fact, is using Balvin to reach a Spanish-speaking audience. (He appeared on **Ariana Grande (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/ariana-grande/>)** and **Maroon 5 (<https://www.billboard.com/artist/maroon-5/>)** tracks almost a decade ago.) But if they are well-worn, they are also a sign that UMG

is treating Badshah as a global priority.

“Voodoo” debuted and peaked at No. 95 on YouTube’s Global Top Music Videos chart, with 4.73 million views. On Spotify, the song has 15.9 million streams, considerably less than Badshah’s last big hit with UMG, “Jugnu,” released in 2021, which has 66 million streams on the platform.

Through Aug. 18, all versions of the track combined have generated 35.3 million official on-demand streams globally (4.1 million were in the United States). But “Voodoo” has failed to rank among the top 10,000 year-to-date most streamed songs globally, by on-demand streams (inclusive of user-generated content), according to Luminate.

UMG views the experiment as a success, saying the song has streamed in 173 countries and that its real-time partner data shows “Voodoo” has over 100 million combined streams worldwide as of Aug. 4, including user-generated content. (More than half were video streams.) The record has started to flip the script for Badshah, a UMG representative tells *Billboard*, with 62% of his total consumption coming from outside India, compared with just 12% in 2021. “Solely looking at charts,” the representative says, “does not reflect the deal we have and how we generate income for us or the artist from this project.”

Sanyal believes that for a non-Western act to succeed outside their own market, “you need to be a leader in your own industry first, and you need to be singer, songwriter, composer and producer all rolled in one because then you can create not just a hook, but a sound, a vibe.”

Whether Badshah can create that vibe and someday rival K-pop’s overseas success — a long-term goal of his — remains to be seen. “K-Pop makes us want to go to Korea,” the rapper says — something he hopes Desi pop will do for India.

For UMG, Grainge “wants Badshah to succeed as much as he would have wanted a Drake, Maroon 5 or Rihanna to have succeeded back in the day,” says Sanyal, “because each one of them was breaking some mold.”