

A black and white close-up portrait of J. Balvin. He is wearing a dark hoodie with the hood pulled up over his head. His hands are visible, gripping the top of the hood. He has a slight smile and is looking directly at the camera. The background is plain white.

| *all* | access

LEADER OF THE NEW SCHOOL

WITH HIS IRRESISTIBLE CHARM AND MEGAHITS “6 AM” AND “AY VAMOS,” COLOMBIAN ARTIST J. BALVIN IS OUR NEW REGGAETON OBSESSION.

BY JESÚS TRIVIÑO ALARCÓN

“J. BALVIN! CAN WE TAKE A PICTURE WITH YOU?” SCREAMS A FAN.

Another admirer waits her turn on a blustery fall evening outside New York City’s Madison Square Garden, where the Colombian reggaeton artist will later open for Pitbull and Enrique Iglesias. Balvin, 29, looking stylish in a leather jacket, black T-shirt and jeans, puts his arm around the thrilled fan and flashes his smile. The girl melts in his embrace.

“It’s so beautiful to get love from the public,” Balvin says. If he savors the moment, it could be because it took him almost a decade, bouts with panic attacks and a strained relationship with his ex-manager father to get to the point where he’s touring with two of Latin music’s reigning pop gods. And there’s no question he belongs in that company: Balvin’s melodic style of reggaeton, his intimate connection with his fans via social media and his dashing good looks have him poised to be the new Latin heartthrob.

The first time José Balvin was in New York—in 2002, when he headed north to visit family in Queens and Staten Island—he found work walking dogs in Soho. That’s when he fell in love with hip-hop and started to dream of a music career.

“When I got to New York it was, like, to live and breathe hip-hop,” says Balvin, who as a teenager played guitar in a rock band, covering hits by Nirvana, Metallica and Offspring.

Balvin soon realized that he needed to go home if he were to develop his true voice as an artist. The fact that Colombia had already spawned international superstars like Shakira, Juanes and Carlos Vives inspired him. He created mixtape after mixtape until

something hit. Before long, Balvin had a new nickname—El Negocio.

“When I was starting out I would sell my own CDs,” he remembers. “A friend of mine bought one from me and I convinced him to buy 10. He said, ‘Damn, you’re El Negocio!’”

Today, Balvin is all business, but as a precocious child growing up in Medellín, he gave his parents fits. When he wasn’t playing soccer with his neighborhood friends, he was burning things—literally.

“When I was 12 I set a complete bush on fire,” he recalls. “The firefighters came and I stayed around the flame for a while, so I came home with my clothes all stained, which is when they noticed it was me.”



o to 100: Balvin is miles ahead of the competition.

Now, Balvin is just burning up the charts—his single “6 AM” spent the summer atop the *Billboard* Latin Rhythm Airplay chart. His success can be attributed to a few things: as a reggaeton artist, he doesn’t only rap like Tego Calderón—Balvin also sings. Plus, he’s not from Puerto Rico, the biggest exporter of reggaetoneros like Daddy Yankee and Don Omar; he’s an outsider the way Drake, a Canadian actor, was to American hip-hop.

“I’m pretty much trying to do what Drake did but in the Latin market,” agrees Balvin, who welcomes the comparisons. “I’m from Colombia and I’m triumphing in a world dominated by Puerto Ricans and Panamanians. I definitely identify with Drake.”

Like Drake, Balvin is all about playing the field, but says he would reconsider if the right woman came along. “I want a confident, affectionate woman who demonstrates that she wants to be with me,” he says. We ask, “Rihanna, perhaps?” He laughs. “Ah, *que rico!*”

In the meantime, his four dogs—Seite, Fuego, Crystal and Edison—keep him company, and his planned crossover album is keeping him busy. With three Latin Grammy nominations and that killer smile, crossing over should be easy.

“Humility is the key to success,” Balvin says, a lesson he credits to Pit and Iglesias. Gesturing toward the floodlit arena behind him, he adds, “Hopefully in two years I’ll be headlining Madison Square Garden.” With that, he zips up his leather jacket, scurries toward the back entrance and vanishes within seconds. Balvin is clearly a man on the move.