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Posted by [*Sasha Frere-Jones*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/sasha_frere-jones/search?contributorName=Sasha%20Frere%20Jones)

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The most important artist of the aughts played the Super Bowl last night. Maybe you saw it. In the middle of Madonna’s set, Maya Arulpragasam—professionally known as M.I.A.—performed her part in the new Madonna song, “[Give Me All Your Luvin’](https://youtu.be/cItHOl5LRWg).” In the original video, she ends her kind of meh verse by saying “I’ma say this once—yeah, I don’t give a sh\*t.” Also in the video, she makes the “finger gun” hand signal, synced to a gunshot that references her biggest hit, “[Paper Planes](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7sei-eEjy4g).” Last night, she flipped America the bird, rather than a gun. Cue apologies and hand wringing.

As reported by [Todd Martens](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/music_blog/2012/02/mias-halftime-gesture-said-to-be-a-a-case-of-adrenaline.html) and [Patrick Kevin Day](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/2012/02/mia-super-bowl-finger.html) on the Los Angeles *Times* Web site, the NFL, NBC, and M.I.A. have all apologized. Tim Winter of the Parents Television Council, whose job is to get mad, got mad about this “[offensive material](http://www.parentstv.org/PTC/news/release/2012/0206.asp).” So we have two subjects: the incident and the artist.

Above, Maya Arulpragasam, also known as M.I.A., poses for a picture in 2007.

The outrage is tiresome and deeply hypocritical, in all the tiresome ways you’ve been tired out by before. M.I.A. was illustrating her line, acting out the attitude of the words: performing. Fine, it may not be legal to flip the bird on television, but that’s simply a remnant of the fifties we haven’t shaken. Unless somebody was handing out Xanax with the foam fingers, Lucas Oil Stadium was ringing with the music of profanities last night. More to the point, television viewers were submitted to ad after ad that likened women—negatively—to sofas, cars, and candy. Mr. Winter didn’t have anything to say about that, so I’d like to raise both of my middle fingers to him and anyone who thinks profanity is somehow more harmful to our children than images of violence and misogyny. (My two sons, fourteen and eleven, thought the Fiat ad was corny, so I guess they will be safe without Mr. Winter’s intervention.) I say we get out of The Pretending To Be Moral game altogether and use the Internet for important things like posting pictures of cats looking at croissants and PDFs of sensitive government documents.

The artist, of course, is M.I.A. About seven years ago, [I praised her for several things](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2004/11/22/041122crmu_music?currentPage=all), including turning the noxious generalization of “world music” into an idea that represents life as it is lived, and affords huge aesthetic possibilities. She made two albums that received all the praise they deserved, and then a third album called “*/\/\/\Y/\*,” which received [a deeply weird and negative review in](http://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/14434-y/) Pitchfork (unless you think M.I.A. is here only to provide “bangers” and hasn’t already vaulted way past her “potential as a pop artist” many times) and, most damagingly, [the worst profile ever written about a musician](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/30/magazine/30mia-t.html?pagewanted=all), in the New York Times Magazine. (The trend of letting people who know nothing about music profile musicians is as outdated as fretting about cursing. Quite rightly, nobody would ever let me profile an Al Qaeda member; somehow, though, pop music is such a culturally light topic that no background is needed to cover it.)

Maya provokes, over and over, and if some of the provocations don’t entirely work, that hardly invalidates the ones that do. Her new single, “Bad Girls,” isn’t up to much, but director Romain Gavras makes it an uncanny combination of club swagger and rebel time-wasting [in this video](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2uYs0gJD-LE), a bit like a Syrian version of “[Two-Lane Blacktop](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JKcIGPQST9s).” On the other side of the scale, Gavras and M.I.A. teamed up for the “[Born Free” video](http://vimeo.com/12082980), which was banned by YouTube (your go-to source for family-friendly material). Unless you’re living somewhere very unusual, the sight of white people being rounded up and shot is genuinely unsettling and not trivial, not when the [U.S. is expanding its ability to detain people indefinitely](http://www.salon.com/2011/12/15/obama_to_sign_indefinite_detention_bill_into_law/) and [innocent people have been detained and tortured at Guantánamo Bay](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/wikileaks/8471907/WikiLeaks-Guantanamo-Bay-terrorist-secrets-revealed.html). Remind me why we’re talking about a middle finger again? I’m just sorry Maya apologized.