

“This Shit is Bananas”

Gwen Stefani’s “Hollaback Girl” is one of the most baffling pieces of music of the modern age. It’s got something to do with cheerleaders—that much is clear, judging from the chanting and the marching band that’s honking and tooting in the background. Beyond that, good luck deciphering the song’s ambiguities. We were so vexed by the mystery that is “Hollaback Girl” that we have devoted countless hours to its study. Our conclusions are below. The first thing you should know, though, is that Gwen is not singing “I ain’t no Harlem fat girl”—at least, we don’t think she is.

Uh huh, this my shit

Gwen is introducing us to her shit.

All the girls stomp your feet like this

This talk of shit and stomping has nothing to do with actually stepping on feces. But what does it mean? From a reading of the later text, we can conclude that the song takes place in the world of high school athletics, and that Gwen is apparently leading the girls in a calisthenics exercise. The “shit,” we surmise, is what she calls the exercises she’s teaching the other girls.

A few times I’ve been around that track

So it’s not just gonna happen like that

Here, Gwen exhorts the girls to try harder as they jog around the track, reminding them that physical fitness is “not just gonna happen,” but must be worked at.

Cause I ain’t no hollaback girl

I ain’t no hollaback girl

These lines are the most confusing, but their meaning will become clearer later.

Oooh, this my shit, this my shit

Gwen repeats this four more times. She wants to make sure that we are well acquainted with her shit.

I heard that you were talking shit

And you didn’t think that I would hear it

Gwen has been the victim of some slanderous high school gossip, and she doesn’t appreciate it. Gwen is 35 years old sliding into MILF status at this point, but we’ll grant her some poetic license.

People hear you talking like that, getting everybody fired up

So I’m ready to attack, gonna lead the pack

Gwen is going to round up a “posse” of her girlfriends and retaliate against the person who’s been talking “smack” about her.

Gonna get a touchdown, gonna take you out

Gwen is going to beat up the person who wronged her, after she completes the cheerleading routine that will inspire the football team to score a touchdown. Gwen has interesting priorities.

That’s right, put your pom-poms down, getting everybody fired up

It seems the entire cheerleading squad is going to beat up the person who spoke ill of Gwen; they have put down their pom-poms, and they are now “fired up” to exact swift and terrible vengeance on Gwen’s behalf.

*A few times I've been around that track
So it's not just gonna happen like that
Cause I ain't no hollaback girl
I ain't no hollaback girl*

Gwen is apparently the captain of the cheerleader squad; she is the girl who “hollas” the chants, not one of the girls who simply “hollas” them back. Given that the squad is preparing to beat somebody up on Gwen’s behalf, she’s picked a strange time to remind them that she is their leader and they are her sheep-like followers. Gwen obviously rules her squad with an iron fist.

Oooh, this my shit, this my shit [repeated four times]
Again with the shit.

*So that's right dude, meet me at the bleachers
No principals, no student-teachers
Both of us want to be the winner, but there can only be one
So I'm gonna fight, gonna give it my all*

We learn that it was a “dude” who gossiped about Gwen. She challenges him to a fight at the bleachers. If he imagines it will be a fair, one-on-one fight, he is sadly mistaken. Gwen and her aforementioned “pack” will pounce on him like rabid wolves.

*Gonna make you fall, gonna sock it to you
That's right, I'm the last one standing, another one bites the dust*

Gwen’s pack of furious cheerleaders leaves the boy a quivering, bloody heap behind the bleachers for the groundskeeper to discover the next day.

*A few times I've been around that track
So it's not just gonna happen like that
Cause I ain't no hollaback girl
I ain't no hollaback girl*

Having completed their ghastly work, Gwen’s squad members return to the field and resume their cheerleading activities, as Gwen reminds them once more that she is the boss and they are all her bitches.

Oooh, this my shit, this my shit [repeated four times]

By calling her exercise routines “shit,” Gwen is showing us that for all her bravado, the character in this song secretly suffers from profound self-esteem issues. She is a complex antiheroine for an age of changing gender attitudes and expectations.

*Let me hear you say, this shit is bananas
B-A-N-A-N-A-S*

Here, Gwen steps away from this bloody spectacle for a moment to comment on the madness and ugliness of what we’ve just witnessed, and, by extension, the petty rivalries of high school in general. This shit is bananas, Gwen tells us, and we can only agree. And lest we miss the point, she spells it out. And repeats it another three times.

*A few times I've been around that track
So it's not just gonna happen like that
Cause I ain't no hollaback girl
I ain't no hollaback girl*

Back on the field, Gwen is still bullying the squad to carry out her routines. But now we see her in a new light, as the sad, lost creature she truly is.

Oooh, this my shit, this my shit [repeated four times]

As the song fades out, Gwen is left only with her “shit,” the mindless exercises that bring her no comfort from the raging emptiness within. As much as she “hollas,” no one hears her cries for help.

Vocabulary: “This Shit is Bananas”

literature _____

fiction _____

style _____

register _____

formal _____

informal _____

casual _____

colloquial _____

double negation (*I ain't no...*) _____

beyond that _____

ambiguity _____

ambiguous _____

to vex _____

countless _____

to conclude, a conclusion _____

to have sth to do with _____

to take place _____

apparently _____

to suppose (= to surmise) _____

to assume _____

to guess _____

to urge (= to exhort) _____

to be well acquainted with sth _____

to be familiar with sth _____

gossip _____

to appreciate _____

swift (= fast, quick) _____

on sb's behalf _____

to pick (to choose) _____

to rule with an iron fist _____

to challenge, a challenge _____

to mention _____

aforementioned _____

to remind sb of sth _____

to suffer from sth _____

profound _____

high / low self-esteem _____

issue _____

to witness, a witness _____