

BTS



ONE

KATY SPRINKEL

lots: one



Katy Sprinkel



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1. Beyond the Superlatives

They have toppled seemingly every record imaginable—social media engagements, video streams, concert revenues, chart superlatives. They're award-winning songwriters, cultural ambassadors, and boundary-pushing social justice warriors. They are RM, Jin, Suga, V, J-Hope, Jimin, and Jungkook—BTS—and they are anything but a boy band. They are a worldwide phenomenon the likes of which have never been seen before.

The story of BTS for so long has been how and when they would make inroads in America. Could a Korean-language artist ever make it in the States? These days that question has been emphatically answered: yes!



Looking dapper while stopping by for a chat with DJ Elvis Duran in 2019.

BTS is on a hot streak like none other, and 2020 was their best year to date in the U.S. While many artists put their creative plans on hold during the global pandemic, BTS went the other way. Just because they couldn't continue their world tour didn't mean they wouldn't perform for their fans. They held an online concert in October and ended up selling more than 100 million tickets for the virtual event.

“They’ve managed to invade America on their own terms, filling stadiums without watering down a single detail of their sound or style. Instead, these guys just let the rest of the world cross over to them. Any wisened-up industry observer could have advised them why this feat was totally impossible. Yet BTS have proven all the conventional wisdom wrong, blowing up into a whole new kind of global pop phenomenon.”

—*Rolling Stone*

It also didn't mean they couldn't create more music. They released not one but two full-length albums in 2020—both of which hit No. 1 on the Billboard charts—and to the delight of their legion of fans in the West, they released their first all-English language single, the infectiously joyous “Dynamite.” That single debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 in the top spot, becoming their first-ever song to reach No. 1 in the United States. That news sent major shock waves through the industry. (BTS even got a shout-out from the president of South Korea for the achievement.) A few weeks later, their remix of Jawsh 685 and Jason Derulo's “Savage Love” took the No. 1 spot too. But they weren't done just yet. They again debuted at No. 1 with another single, “Life Goes On,” in December to close out the calendar year.



Rocking a Beatles-esque look at the 2020 Billboard Music Awards. The group took home the honors for Top Social Artist for the fourth consecutive year.

They were named Band of the Year by music tastemakers *Consequence of Sound*. They also claimed the top spot as Entertainer of the Year in *Time* magazine's year-end review. Oh, and they finally got their first Grammy nod in 2020 too. As Pitchfork put it, "BTS has broken so many records, at such a frantic pace, that any effort to tally them becomes almost instantly obsolete."

The numbers themselves are eye-popping and the superlatives are gaudy, but they do nothing to tell the real story of the group, which is single-handedly redefining the musical landscape for the 21st century. So what makes BTS so special? The secret to BTS's success is a combination of factors. First, their strict discipline and indefatigable attitude. In the tradition of K-pop, the band works day and night on their songwriting and dancing, making sure every last detail is polished to perfection. Crisp, precise choreography and intricately woven melodies are bedrocks of the K-pop sound, and perhaps no group exemplifies this better than BTS.



Though their global success story has long been written, BTS's surge in America is just beginning.

They began and continue as boundary pushers. They knew from the outset that they wanted their music to *say something*. Their songs confront issues most pop artists would never touch, from mental health to income inequality to xenophobia. Their message of universal love and kindness is a signature that has resonated with listeners worldwide.



Performing at the Grammys was one goal. (They achieved it in 2020, alongside Lil Nas X.) The next? To win one.

Indeed the greatest ingredient in BTS's recipe for what seems nothing short of complete world dominance is their ARMY (short for Adorable Representative MC for Youth)—the dedicated, energetic fan base that works as hard for their idols as the members of the band do themselves. Their ability to make an impact has catapulted BTS to incredible heights. The ARMY mobilizes to ensure that each BTS release, whether it be a single, music video, or album, reaches instant trending status. They translate lyrics, tweets, and videos, sharing them freely with one another. They are avid consumers of all things BTS, from merchandise to information to (of course) the music. They even spearhead charity fund-raisers for causes the band supports. In short, they spread the word of BTS in every

conceivable way. Their engagement and up-to-the-moment knowledge of the BTS universe is unparalleled, period.



for the
RECORD

When *Map of the Soul: Persona* hit No. 1 on the Billboard albums chart in 2019, BTS became one of three groups ever to accomplish the feat three times within a yearlong span (*Love Yourself: Tear* and *Love Yourself: Answer* also claimed the top spot), and the first artist since the Beatles. That's not the only superlative they share with the Fab Four. In 2020 BTS became just the fourth group since the Beatles to simultaneously hold both No. 1 and No. 2 spots on the Billboard Hot 100 chart.

For those readers who don't know what Jimin had for lunch today, consider this your formal introduction to all things BTS. And for those of you who know he had a bowl of kimchi *jjigae*, enjoy taking a stroll down memory lane with your idols!

2. Big-Time Showbiz

To understand just how massive BTS's success has been worldwide, it's important to understand the foundations of K-pop itself (that's Korean pop, for the uninitiated). To the outside observer, K-pop looks like a sugarcoated confection—danceable beats, catchy hooks, super-sharp choreography, and kaleidoscopic visuals from ultra-attractive performers. But to dismiss it as a shallow version of pop music would be way off the mark. Not only is K-pop wide-ranging in its musical styles and onstage offerings, it's serious business. Big business.



The music competition show vets perform on the MBC Plus X Genie Music Awards in 2018.

It's a multibillion-dollar industry that makes South Korea one of the leading players on the global entertainment stage. And that's no small feat when you consider South Korea has a population of only 51 million people. (Compare that to the U.S.'s 331 million.) In fact, South Korea "is the world's eighth largest market for recorded music by revenue," according to a Bloomberg report. That's bigger

than India, whose own entertainment industry is world-famous, and even China! For those of you who like to crunch the numbers, China and India are the two most populous countries in the world, with 1.4 billion and 1.3 billion citizens, respectively!

So how did Korean culture become such a juggernaut? It's complicated. First, consider that the entertainment industry went through a huge overhaul at the end of the 20th century. In 1986, with a change in Korea's government regime, strict censorship laws were repealed. This led to a proliferation of creativity in film, TV, art, and music. Two years later, South Korea's ban on foreign travel was lifted, leading to a huge influx in tourism dollars. Visitors, especially Japanese and Chinese tourists, went gaga for Korean culture.



BTS performs onstage for the 2020 American Music Awards on November 22, 2020, in South Korea.

When the Asian financial crisis swept across the continent in 1997, South Korea teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. Newly elected president Kim Dae-jung made a bold move, investing heavily in the country's entertainment industry as a lifeline for economic survival. The gambit worked. Around the same time, China loosened restrictions on their own airwaves, allowing Korean music to broadly reach

Chinese audiences, and Korean TV also became a huge sensation in Japan. International audiences' obsession with Korean entertainers had an enormous ripple effect, and the appetite for all things Korean became insatiable.

They call it *hallyu*—the Korean Wave—and it describes the influence of Korean culture on consumers worldwide. It encompasses entertainment but also business, fashion, beauty, and cuisine, just to name a few. (It sounds outlandish, but it's not inaccurate to say that the immense popularity of K-pop and K-drama (TV) created opportunities for consumers to get Samsung cell phones and buy kimchi at their grocery stores.)

The term *hallyu* was initially coined by Chinese journalists looking to describe the immense effect Korean culture exerted on Chinese pop culture. Not one to miss an opportunity, the Korean government adopted the term as not just a badge of honor but a directive. South Korea's culture ministry even has an official *hallyu* department, which oversees the promotion of the Korean wave at home and abroad.

Without a doubt, K-pop is the glittering jewel in the *hallyu* crown. It is a musical product that is a genre all its own. Often it is exemplified by its catchy hooks, fast tempos, and upbeat themes accompanied by complex choreography and stunning visuals. But what you might not know about it is that in the grand scheme of things, it's a relatively new medium. Most would agree that you can pinpoint the birth of K-pop to the day: April 11, 1992.

gangnam STYLE

Psy made it a household name in the U.S., riding that invisible horse to YouTube infamy. (The “Gangnam Style” music video remains one of the most watched of all time on the platform, with nearly 4 billion views as of this writing.) But did you know that the Gangnam district in Seoul is also the epicenter of *hallyu* culture? Visitors can enjoy the high-end shopping and entertainment there, and even rub elbows with BTS—or at least their likenesses—on K-Star Road, among many other attractions.



**Psy performs
“Gangnam Style” at
the 2013 MuchMusic
Video Awards.**

So what happened? Seo Taiji and Boys happened. Performing “Nan Arayo” on the MBC network’s weekly singing competition, they basically blew the roof off the place. The song, which translates roughly to “I Know,” contained elements that would have been familiar to American audiences at the time but were wholly unfamiliar to Korean viewers. It was seemingly influenced by the new jack swing style popularized in the early 1990s by American artists such as Bell Biv DeVoe and Bobby Brown, among others.

Seo Taiji and Boys stunned the judging panel...but received the lowest possible score for their performance. The band didn’t win the competition, but they did something far more lasting: they lit the spark that ignited the K-pop explosion. And despite the fact that the judges hated it, fellow artists and audiences both liked what they heard. Musical groups began to expand their horizons beyond the staid sound that was then in fashion in South Korea at the time. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Musical competition shows (*bang song*) still rule the day in South Korea, and serve as a launching pad for most K-pop groups, BTS included. However, before Seo Taiji and Boys, the music was ostensibly minted by the broadcasting companies, who in turn promoted their respective on-air products. Today the labels and artists are driving the creative output.

“Rather than approach K-pop as a genre, a better approach would be ‘integrated content.’... Not just the music but the clothes, the makeup, the choreography.... All these elements...amalgamate together in a visual and audio package. That I think sets it apart from other music or maybe other genres.”

—Suga in 2019

There is a ritual and a formula to most aspects of K-pop. It starts at a group’s conception. Unlike American record labels, Korean record labels function as distributors, management companies, and talent agencies all in one. They manage each artist from recruitment all the way to rollout, keeping a heavy hand in coordinating creative endeavors. Labels typically spend years cultivating trainees, grooming them in every possible aspect of performance. Performers start early, auditioning as young as age nine. Foreign language fluency is prized in trainees, and native English speakers are a sought-after commodity.

Children are schooled during the day—a curriculum that typically includes heavy doses of Chinese, Japanese, and English instruction. Then once the school day is over, students begin their music training, ranging from vocal lessons to choreography to strength training and even media training. It is not for the faint of heart; a typical day begins early in the morning and stretches to the late evening hours before students return to their dormitories to complete their homework.

Performers will spend years as trainees before even seeing an audience. Nothing is left to chance when it comes to calculating an artist's debut. Every onstage move is polished to precision, all the way down to the smallest gesture and wink. It's an enormous amount of work and preparation. According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, the estimated cost of training just one individual is a staggering \$3 million.

The pace doesn't slacken once a group debuts, either. They tour extensively, publicize exhaustively, and are often tied to multiple endorsement deals that require appearances and other promotional duties.



BTS performs on the MBC *bang song Show Champion* in 2013.

And that's to say nothing about the music. Groups are expected to release songs early and often. Unlike American artists, whose album launches are planned months and even years ahead of time, K-pop groups will announce a release and drop an EP or album within a few weeks' time, only to go right back to the drawing board. Typically a K-pop artist will churn out music throughout the calendar year. And that music is almost always accompanied by a music video and a specific choreographed performance, both integral pieces of the K-pop formula.

The spectacle of K-pop—the vivid, Technicolor videos; the mind-blowing, hyper-precise dancing; the impossibly attractive entertainers; and of course the undeniable music—makes it tailor-made for the Internet age. The globalization of the music industry, through which access to any song is just a mouse click away, has created a massive sea change in how music is accessed, bought, and consumed. And perhaps no product has been a greater beneficiary of this new landscape than K-pop.

Great Moments in Hallyu: American Edition

1994: All-American Girl, created by and starring comedienne Margaret Cho, premieres on ABC. It is the first major network show to feature an East Asian family at its center.

2003: A Tale of Two Sisters is the first Korean-language horror film to be released in U.S. theaters, kicking off a K-horror craze. (An English-language remake, The Uninvited, was released in 2009.)

2007: The son of Korean immigrants, chef David Chang wins his first James Beard Award en route to becoming one of the most influential chefs in the nation.

2009: Seoul-based Samsung releases its first Galaxy smartphone to U.S. retailers.

2012: The first KCON is held in the U.S., allowing fans to get up close and personal with their favorite K-pop artists.

2012: Psy's "Gangnam Style" sweeps the nation, becoming the most watched video in YouTube history, a title it will hold for five years.

2019: Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite wins the Academy Award for Best Picture, the first foreign language film ever to win the prize in the awards' nearly century-long history.

2020: BTS (finally) gets their first No. 1 single on the Billboard Hot 100 when "Dynamite" debuts at the top spot.