

WORTHY OF WORSHIP?

The Korean Wave of the 1990s created a multi-billion-dollar industry, where pop stars are carefully groomed and cultivated. South Korea's K-pop bands today have one mission only — to become icons, says Seoul-based writer Dave Hazzan.

Within just two decades, a small, crowded country once famous for nothing but compact cars and pickled cabbage has come to produce Asia's most prominent idols. It all began around the turn of the 21st century, when South Korean entertainment companies threw money at K-pop (Korean pop music) and the notion of *Hallyu* — Korean TV shows, movies and literature designed to increase the country's brand value abroad — was born. The investment sparked global interest in Korean pop culture, referred to as the Korean Wave. In South America, K-pop bands have sold out soccer stadiums and even the UAE hosted a huge K-pop festival, KCon 2016, earlier this year. At home, K-pop not only made big bucks, but provided millions of Koreans their very own, homegrown icons.

What makes K-pop so distinct from other pop genres is that no other kind of music is so rigidly manufactured. It's much less about talent and more about entertainment. Most groups you might have heard of (H.O.T, Shinhwa and BIGBANG, to name a few) are created by just three companies: YG Entertainment (the YG stands for 'Yang Goon', in reference to executive director and founder Yang Hyun-suk, the brains behind global phenomenon Psy); SM Entertainment (founded by Lee Soo-man); and JYP Entertainment (founded by Park Jin-young). Their aim is to form supergroups. In contrast to American music, in which agencies identify potential and work with artists to produce music and revenue, K-pop is solely about making money. Band members are expected to be a well-oiled cog in a bigger machine. Young, often pre-teen, boys and girls are auditioned. Parents sign waivers, and then young hopefuls are put through a rigorous dancing and singing boot camp that continues throughout their careers. It's not uncommon for many kids to drop out, sick and exhausted from a non-stop routine of training. (Watch any K-pop concert and you'll notice no one misses a cue, ever.) "There's never been a garage K-pop band," says Seoul-based music journalist Jon Dunbar. "They're not really creative musicians, they just dance routines and sing songs they've [learnt with their eyes closed]." The companies put huge sums of money into videos, the primary way fans enjoy music around the region. Every K-pop video is a tremendous production featuring exotic locations, detailed sets, half-a-dozen or so costumes, and a hair and make-up budget unparalleled in the Western world.

When K-pop began in the early 1990s with the formation of SM's boy band, Seo Taiji and Boys, there were issues with

distribution, recalls Oh In-gyu, Professor of Hallyu Studies at Korea University. Japan was really the only place it could go, due to the Asian focus of the bands. But those issues ended with serendipitous arrival of the great video saviour, YouTube, in 2005. "[In launching YouTube,] Americans opened up the door for them for worldwide distribution," Oh explains. "Korean production of videos is probably number one for quality these days. They have enormous resources in the music-video business." Psy's 2012 hit, 'Gangnam Style', has so far had over 2.6 billion views on the site. That same year, he beat pop heavyweights Rihanna, Katy Perry and Lady Gaga to win Best Video at the MTV Music Video Awards. Without Psy's video, he certainly wouldn't have had the reach and made the impact he did. It's interesting that 'Gangnam Style' was the song to have brought K-pop to the mainstream, given that Psy is the antithesis to most K-pop artists. He's overweight, controversial, and he didn't come out of the K-pop factory. Dunbar, who worked for Korea.net, a South Korean government cultural promotion website, said they were initially embarrassed by Psy's success. "The whole thing with 'Gangnam Style' was just a complete fluke that came about with absolutely zero support from any Hallyu agency," Dunbar says.

Production values aside, what is it that makes K-pop so attractive to millions around the world? Many people feel the key is a catchy tune, and fans find it hard not to get hooked on the music — they find it captivating, fun and, above all, totally inoffensive (a carefully controlled ingredient that allows bands to be looked up to as role models). It helps that K-pop stars are attractive. Entertainment companies choose 'candidates' based on looks, and not talent (after all, talent can be honed and learnt, according to the K-pop formula), and they enforce rigid diets and have regular weigh-ins of their stars. Plastic surgery is not just common, it's expected, which is why so many K-pop stars look alike. The men are muscled with rigid six-packs, and the women are becoming dangerously thinner. Band members also aren't allowed to date — they need to appear accessible to fans.

Most K-pop fans are young women. Oh calls it "gendered melancholia," a feeling that by watching these beautiful women (and men) they become like them. And that's the whole point. K-pop stars exist to become icons. SM reported a net income of \$19 million last year, so clearly creating icons generates big bucks. But is it art? It's certainly performance, but moulding a pop star out of nothing might be better recognized as manufacturing.

K-pop fans at the K-Pop Festival Music Bank concert on June 23, 2012. (Photo by Jean Chung/Getty Images)

