In 2017, the American Music Awards were held in Los Angeles. Pop sensation BTS became the first Korean pop group to perform at the awards ceremony, which, along with the Grammys, is considered as one of the biggest music awards shows in the U.S. The seven-member group BTS gave a great live performance, featuring songs off its new single “DNA,” and the audience loved it. Since then, BTS has broken record after record, becoming the first group since the Beatles to send three albums to the number one spot in America in less than a year. In April 2019, K-pop phenomenon BLACKPINK made their U.S. festival debut, making history as the first K-pop girl group ever to perform at Coachella. Previously regarded as part of a distant land far away, Korean pop music has now gained a presence in the very birthplace of pop music.

K-pop today,

Striking a chord

Today’s pop fever is clearly different from past peaks of Korean pop, known across East Asia and elsewhere as the “Korean Wave.” Going beyond good looks, nice hair and a mastery of song and dance, Korean pop artists today deliver stories that resonate with fans around the world. BTS released a trilogy on the theme of “The Most Beautiful Moment in Life,” depicting the frustration and anxiety felt by youth everywhere, and used Hermann Hesse’s classic novel “Demian” as a motif for its album “Wings.” The group Twice makes a reference to Instagram on the track “Likey,” and sings, “I’m like TT,” where “TT” is the emoji that resembles tears flowing down from one’s eyes. The lyrics are aimed at teenagers. Regardless of nationality or language, the songs contain themes that are universal and easily understood in both East and West. Such attempts have contributed to a convergence in global pop music. Music videos play an important role in helping audiences to understand underlying messages, even if they don’t fully understand the language. Visual elements are effectively incorporated into the overall musical experience to explain unique concepts and the story behind each song, evoking emotions even among foreign listeners. The inclusion of non-Korean members in the pop groups is another factor that helps Korean pop to reach out to audiences abroad. Perhaps it’s no coincidence that there are three Japanese members in Twice, the most popular Korean girl group in Japan. This alone gives Twice a competitive edge over solely-Korean pop groups. Major entertainment agencies hold auditions in Korea, Japan, Taiwan and elsewhere to recruit non-Korean members. In the case of SM Entertainment, sub-groups of the pop group NCT have been launched in other countries, including the U.S., mainland China and Japan. The key to success for Korean pop artists, besides high-quality singing and dancing, lies in connecting with fans through storytelling.
Power of social media

In 2012, Psy’s global sensation “Gangnam Style” went viral on YouTube. There’s no denying that YouTube helped to create the “Gangnam Style” wave. Now, more than ever, social media and similar video-sharing platforms are actively used as tools for marketing and branding. In November 2017, BTS reached 10 million followers on Twitter, a first in Korea, and was also named the most re-tweeted artist of the year. The pop group not only released mix tapes and cover songs, but also posted self-produced videos two to three times a week, allowing the group to interact with its followers. What made the group a global Twitter star was its efforts to tweet in their fans’ languages, so as to reach out to as many people as possible all around the world. Ranked first in a Billboard list of Top-5 New K-Pop Artists to Watch in 2018, Stray Kids is a relatively new group on the scene. Although the groups hasn’t made its official debut yet, the boy band has managed to garner a lot of attention by releasing its pre-debut album “Mixtape.” The members wrote the songs and the choreography, and relied on social media to pitch themselves to their fans. The group is an exemplary case for the Korean pop music industry in an age of digital and mobile consumption.

Rigorous training

In the song “Glow,” the group Stray Kids talks about the challenges and confusion experienced as trainees, and how much they look forward to their official debut. As shown in the lyrics, fame and glory don’t come overnight for pop singers. Korean talent agencies have a system of auditions that they use to recruit trainees who have potential to become stars. The three major agencies are SM, YG and JYP. They pick only one or two trainees out of tens of thousands of applicants. The artist Key, a member of the Korean boy group Shinee, was recruited by SM Entertainment from among 8,000 other applicants for the same position. Even after passing the initial audition, trainees undergo rigorous training programs and are assessed at the end of each month. The training period can last from several years to more than a decade. It was 6.5 years for EXO’s member Suho, 10 years for Twice’s Ji-hyo, and seven years for Red Velvet’s Seulgi. They are carefully evaluated based on singing, dancing, acting and linguistic proficiency. In such a cutthroat environment, most applicants spend at least 17 to 18 hours a day honing their skills. Once they make their debuts, the artists are micromanaged by their agencies. Most live in dormitories. This allows for more control, but also strengthens the sense of teamwork, and saves time during busy daily schedules. Sharing their personal lives on social media is how they become more intimate with their fans, but it also means having less time for themselves. The phenomenal success of a few Korean pop stars has, in many ways, overshadowed their hard work and determination.

Audition, audition, audition

Live audition talent shows, such as “Produce 101,” “Mix Nine” and “The Unit,” have grown increasingly popular on Korean TV. The programs feature a diverse range of talent, from fresh trainees to current pop stars who have failed to enjoy lucrative careers. The most successful group to appear on such a show is Wanna One, the winning team of a recent season of “Produce 101.” Wanna One has now set new milestones for other groups, with its first concert garnering more than 20,000 fans and its debut album selling more than one million copies. Instead of talent agencies, viewers themselves, the so-called “national producers,” had the final say in determining the debut of Wanna One. TV viewers and fans voted for their favorite trainees and encouraged others to do the same, as though launching an election campaign. Many fans feel a strong sense of loyalty from having watched their would-be stars grow from week to week, and it’s no wonder that the group topped the charts from the moment of its debut. Live audition TV shows that capture the journey of growth are universally touching. This helps to build a solid fan base, regardless of age, sex or nationality. Other talent agencies have followed suit, encouraging more fans to get involved in choosing members of a new potential pop group or who should release a new single. The wave of Korean pop music that we’ve seen across East Asia and elsewhere is continuing to grow. Billboard will be focusing on Korea as the main content generator in the broader Asian market, and plans to expand across the region with the establishment of Billboard Korea. This is an acknowledgment of the vast influence that talented Korean artists and tightly run talent agencies are having on the world of pop music. The convergence of cultures, the use of social media, and efforts to globalize Korean pop music have all aided in the development of today’s Korean pop music industry. Today, the K-pop music syndrome continues to be strong.

Source: “K-pop today, K-pop tomorrow” by Ahn Min-joo, Korean Culture and Information Service (KOCIS)