

Blackpink

M E E T S T H E

Red, White and Blue

Clockwise from top left:
Rosé, Jennie, Lisa and
Jisoo of Blackpink
photographed Feb. 8
at Smashbox Studios
in Los Angeles.

From the start, they were conceived as a girl group with global appeal. As they touch down in the U.S. for the first time, can the new queens of K-pop crack the American pop code?

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BY NOLAN FEENEY

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
ALEXANDRA GAVILLET





Jennie



Rosé



ON A MODEST STAGE INSIDE A tent in downtown Los Angeles, the four members of the South Korean girl group Blackpink assume a diamond formation and aim their fingers like guns at the audience as they launch into the chorus of their breakout hit, “Ddu-du Ddu-du”: “Wait till I do what I ... Hit you with that *ddu-du ddu-du du!*”

It’s the afternoon before the Grammys at Universal Music Group chairman/CEO Lucian Grainge’s annual showcase, where he presents the company’s prospective

superstars to a crowd of record executives and industry types. (Past performers have included Ariana Grande, Halsey and Shawn Mendes.) With their intense choreography, dance-heavy beats and *Clueless*-esque high-fashion looks, the four women offer the kind of bells-and-whistles pop production that makes them an anomaly not just on today’s lineup, where rappers like 2 Chainz and Lil Baby abound, but also on the charts, where women like Grande serve up their divadom with an extra dose of realism.

The showcase marks Blackpink’s first stateside performance, though the band made history long before: “Ddu-du Ddu-du” became the highest-charting single by a Korean girl group on the Billboard Hot 100 when it peaked at No. 55 last June, and this April the act will be the first Korean girl group to play Coachella,

before embarking on a North American arena tour. “Ddu-du Ddu-du,” sung mostly in Korean, is a boastful warning to those who underestimate Blackpink, with a hook (meant to imitate the sound of bullets flying) that’s also a canny invitation to non-Korean listeners — anyone can sing the words. The buttoned-up UMG crowd seems a little unsure, but also intrigued: Just as Blackpink’s Jennie — soft-spoken in person, but onstage a fierce singer and rapper — slides into a *rat-tat-tat* flow in the second verse, more and more audience members whip out their phones to capture video.

There’s no longer any question that K-pop is happening in America. BTS, the seven-member South Korean boy band, scored two No. 1 albums on the Billboard 200 in 2018 and became the first K-pop group to sell out an American stadium when it played

New York’s Citi Field in October. Yet despite the group’s visibility here, K-pop remains somewhat detached from the mainstream: It receives relatively little top 40 airplay despite fan-army pressure on radio stations, its artists rarely tour with non-K-pop acts, and outside of its intensely passionate fan groups, K-pop stars hardly drive the wider “conversation” that someone like Grande can dominate with a single tweet.

Blackpink represents Korean music’s latest, greatest hope at breaking out of the American K-pop box. The group believes its multinational identity gives it global appeal: Sweet-voiced Jisoo, 24, is a South Korean native; buoyant rapper Lisa, 21, is from Thailand; guitar-playing Rosé, 22, grew up in Australia; and Jennie, 23, was born in South Korea but spent some formative years in New Zealand. “You don’t have

to understand Korean to understand the music, the visuals, the vibe,” says Jisoo, through a translator. (Rosé and Jennie are fluent in English; Lisa alternates between English and Korean during our interview.) “We’ve got so much Korean culture and so much Western culture in us,” adds Rosé, her Australian accent still pronounced.

And though occasional English lyrics already pepper their tracks, Jennie notes that recording all-English songs is

something they “definitely want to do” in the future. (They’re focused on making their debut album first.) Even their sound — an omnivorous fusion of fist-pumping EDM and booming hip-hop beats with flashes of house, ’80s pop and harmonica-driven folk — seems conceived for the widest possible audience. “I was immediately drawn to their fierce and empowering energy,” says Dua Lipa, who asked the group to guest on last year’s bilingual banger “Kiss and Make Up.”

STYLING BY YE JIN KIM; HAIR BY YE MI PARK; AND MAKEUP BY JIYU LAM; SET DESIGN BY DAN LEE



“We’ve got so much Korean culture and so much Western culture in us.” —ROSÉ

“They are not just giving you hit songs — they are sending a message that resonates beyond the lyrics.”

Last fall, Blackpink signed to Interscope Records, which will serve as both a creative and business partner to YG Entertainment, the group’s Korean home and one of South Korea’s three main music companies along with SM Entertainment and JYP Entertainment. These companies serve as label, management firm and production studio, controlling almost every aspect of their artists’ careers. Interscope chairman/CEO John Janick says that YG’s leadership — Hyunsuk “YG” Yang, its founder, and Teddy Park, Blackpink’s main producer and creative director — “runs the show,” but the

relationship is collaborative: Sam Riback, Interscope’s pop-rock A&R head, has made multiple trips to YG’s Seoul headquarters and “has been sending them lots of different ideas,” according to Janick. “Our goal,” he says, “is to amplify what YG has been doing globally.”

If Interscope can help turn Blackpink into a truly global superstar act, the partnership could become a model for other labels looking to invest in K-pop and even pave the way for joint imprints. “This deal could be a benchmark,” says YG’s Joojong “JJ” Joe, who heads the company’s U.S. operations from a small house near Los Angeles’ Echo Park. It will also confirm Interscope’s foresight about K-pop. In

2011, the label signed the group Girls’ Generation during one of the earlier waves of K-pop imports, when artists like BoA and Wonder Girls worked with Western producers and companies.

At the time, those artists barely made a dent on the mainstream charts, and their backers took a hit: Despite high-profile promotional appearances, Girls’ Generation’s *The Boys* LP sold only 1,000 copies in the United States during its first week in 2012, according to Nielsen Music. Since then, however, streaming platforms have made it easier for fans to discover and support Korean music, while the growth of social media has also allowed them to forge deep connections with artists everywhere.



THE TEAM

EXECUTIVE PRODUCER
YG Entertainment
Hyunsuk Yang (“YG”)

**CREATIVE DIRECTOR/
PRODUCER**
YG Entertainment
Teddy Park

MANAGEMENT

YG Entertainment
Joojong Joe
Daniel Hong

LABEL

A&R
YG Entertainment
Yeadeun Kim

Interscope Records
Sam Riback

MARKETING
Interscope Records
Ned Monahan (U.S.),
Jurgen Grebner
(international)

PR
YG Entertainment
Kyunghee Lee

Interscope Records
Dennis Dennehy

TOURING
YG Entertainment
Chiyoung Jeung

**BUSINESS
DEVELOPMENT**
Interscope Records
Jeremy Erlich



“In this era, people find their music and their talented artists on the internet,” says Susan Rosenbluth, senior vp at AEG Presents/GoldenVoice, who helped book Blackpink’s North American tour and notes that K-pop’s stateside audience “does not follow along ethnic lines.”

To Janick, the success of Luis Fonsi and Daddy Yankee’s chart-topping Latin hit, “Despacito,” aided by a Justin Bieber remix, made English-speaking listeners more open-minded in general to music in other languages. “We’re going to have hits from all different territories — more of them, and more often than we’ve seen in the past,” he says.

But the onus isn’t just on listeners to embrace Korean music — it’s on industry gatekeepers too. At the UMG showcase, the reaction to Blackpink is enthusiastic, but it feels muted compared with the rousing ovation the crowd gives classic-rock revivalists Greta Van Fleet, whose 2018 debut album was notoriously panned by some critics as derivative. The response to Blackpink’s Interscope deal, however, suggests that attitude could change.

“So many artists on our roster started calling, saying, ‘I want to work with these

girls.’ Radio stations were asking when new music was going to be out,” says Interscope executive vp business development Jeremy Erlich, who facilitated early conversations between the label and YG (he and Joe attended business school together). “The industry’s ready. When the music comes out, I don’t think there’s going to be many people saying, ‘This is just a fad.’”

THE DAY BEFORE THE showcase, the ladies of Blackpink are ensconced in a hotel suite high above downtown L.A. Lisa,

dressed in a gray fleece and a checkered coat, spies the Hollywood sign through a corner window and bounds off a couch for a closer look. Her bandmates, cozied up in brightly colored sweatshirts and cardigans, admit they weren’t expecting Los Angeles in February to be so chilly. During some rare downtime the previous day, they went shopping in Santa Monica. “It was supposed to be for fashion,” says Jennie, “but we ended up just grabbing anything that was warm.”

This is Blackpink’s first trip to L.A., but

it has been almost a decade in the making. The group’s members came to Seoul from all over the world starting in 2010 to take part in YG’s rigorous recruitment and training process. The company and its competitors hold tryouts both within and far beyond Korea (Rosé traveled to Sydney from her home in Melbourne), seeking recruits who are typically preteens or teens, ethnically Korean and fluent in the language, though these qualities are not mandatory. Lisa, who auditioned in her native Thailand in 2010, didn’t speak any Korean when she began training in Seoul in 2011.

For all four women, joining YG meant enrolling in a kind of full-time pop-star academy that Jennie calls “more strict than school” and that Rosé likens to *The X Factor* with dorm rooms. For 12 hours a day, seven days a week, the future members of Blackpink — along with, by Jennie’s estimate, 10-20 other aspiring singers who cycled through the project — studied singing, dancing and rapping, taking part in monthly tests designed to identify their strengths and weed out subpar trainees. “Somebody would come in with a piece of paper and stick it on a wall, and it would say

“We always wanted to be out there, to be more true to ourselves and a little more free. We just want to show the real us.” —JENNIE



From left: Lisa, Jisoo, Jennie and Rosé. See how well the members know each other at [billboard.com/videos](https://www.billboard.com/videos).



From top: Blackpink's video for "Ddu-du Ddu-du," the highest-charting Hot 100 single yet for a Korean girl group; on *Good Morning America* in February; and onstage at Grainger's UMG artist showcase in Los Angeles on Feb. 9.

who did best, who did worst, who's going home," recalls Jennie, whom YG initially steered toward rapping because she spoke fluent English. "You get a score — A, B, C," Lisa explains. "Lisa would always get A's for everything," adds Jennie with a laugh.

The process was lengthy. Before Blackpink debuted in 2016, Jennie spent six years in training, Lisa and Jisoo five and Rosé four. For the members who had left behind life outside South Korea, the pace of training on top of the culture shock was sometimes tough. "I'd call my parents crying," recalls Rosé. "But as much as it was hard for me to cope with all of that, it made me more hungry. I remember my mom would be like, 'If it's so hard for you, just come back home.' But I'd be like" — she mimics a surly teen's glare, much to the others' amusement — "'That's not what I'm talking about!'" Lisa credits her future bandmates with easing her transition.

"Jennie would speak English to me, and Jisoo helped me out with my Korean," she says. Rosé was the last of the bunch to enter training, but she remembers the four of them bonding during an all-night jam session when she arrived. "We just clicked," she says.

That's clearly still the case: Rosé sometimes puts her hand on Lisa's knee when translating for her, and at one point Jennie and Jisoo huddle close together to silently adjust one of their necklaces, displaying the intimacy of close friends. "We don't really have a day off," says Lisa. (Once every two weeks, Rosé clarifies.) And because their families are so far-flung, they often spend their time off with each other anyway. "We're stuck together," says Rosé, laughing.

While K-pop companies have a reputation for packaging groups assembly line-style, Blackpink's members insist they have plenty of creative input, despite having no official writing credits on their tracks. Park plays them music he's working on and "really tries to put our thoughts into our songs," says Jennie. "He really gets his inspirations from us."

"It's important as recording artists that they actually truly own their songs," says Park. The women all make suggestions about who should sing what, and if a part doesn't feel right to someone, he will make adjustments. "He doesn't just bring us a song, like, 'Go practice,'" says Rosé.

Besides, the members of Blackpink have another creative outlet: Last fall, YG announced that they would all release solo material, starting with Jennie, whose debut single, "Solo," topped *Billboard's* World Digital Song Sales chart in December. Though the music is still created and put out by YG, the idea that group longevity and solo success aren't mutually exclusive is a radical development in girl-group history — one that Janick says only "makes the brand stronger."

Stars who come through companies like YG are called "idols" in Korea and have historically been expected to maintain a squeaky-clean image. When Blackpink debuted, Jennie says YG was very selective about its promotional appearances: "We were trained to be a little more..." "Closed in?" Rosé suggests.

"Closed in" is exactly what the outspoken women ruling the U.S. charts now, from Grande to Halsey, are not — they make deeply personal, even raw, music. But while Blackpink may well find success catering to an audience craving its kind of *TRL*-era pop spectacle — Interscope's Erlich calls

'K-POP HAD TO BE PART OF OUR SHOW'

Its fans stream like crazy, buy tickets by the arena-load and vote their idols to awards show glory. Ten years after K-pop first hit the charts, the genre's stateside growth is truly taking off

When BoA and Wonder Girls became the first K-pop stars to chart on the *Billboard* 200 and Hot 100 in 2009, they foreshadowed one of the fastest-growing music trends of this generation. Though initial efforts behind those groups in the United States fizzled, K-pop has now edged closer than ever before to the mainstream: Witness BTS' two *Billboard* 200 No. 1 albums in 2018, just one indicator of what proved to be a breakout year for K-pop in the United States (six other K-pop acts also landed on the chart that year). And even without much radio play here, K-pop's influence is rapidly growing. As social media and streaming platforms have evolved, so too has an ultra-socially engaged fan base — one that not only devotes entire Twitter accounts to sending its favorite artists up the *Billboard* charts but also buys out arenas to support them and tunes in to splashy TV specials just to catch a glimpse of them, sending Korean acts ever nearer to the forefront of American pop.

In 2016, China's dissatisfaction with a U.S.-South Korean missile-system agreement led it to ban all *hallyu*, or Korean pop cultural content, most prominently K-pop. It was a huge financial hit to the three main K-pop companies. Some continued to approach China with non-Korean acts, but others focused on sending their artists to burgeoning markets like the United States. (Chinese promoters are reportedly pressuring authorities to lift restrictions, driving up K-pop company stock.) Meanwhile, in each of the past

three years, according to Nielsen Music, Korean music consumption in the United States has doubled, and during the same period more Korean artists than ever began touring North America. Korean stars became more prominent on American TV, with BTS appearing at the 2017 and 2018 *Billboard* Music Awards, the 2017 American Music Awards and the 2019 Grammy Awards.

Dick Clark Productions airs both the BBMs and AMAs, and the company credits its initial interest in BTS and K-pop with their growing American followings on social media. (DCP and *Billboard* are both owned by Valence Media.) "It was the *Billboard* charts that indicated that K-pop was now a big part of the music scene in the U.S.," says Ariel Elazar, executive vp brand marketing and digital strategy at DCP. "Once we started looking at engagement, K-pop [artists] had specific U.S.-based fans connecting with them on a personal level on social media. We basically came to the conclusion that K-pop had to be part of our show."

Jeremy Lowe, a senior manager on the same DCP team, points out that such televised events offer K-pop artists access not only to a much wider U.S. audience, but also to Western acts with whom they might make chart hits in the future. While in Los Angeles in 2017 for the BBMs, BTS and The Chainsmokers met up; four months later, a co-write with The Chainsmokers' Drew Taggart, "Best of Me," appeared on BTS' *Love Yourself: Her*. Over the past couple of years, similar collaborations have proliferated, like BTS' "Mic Drop (Remix)"



BTS accepted the top social artist honor at the 2018 *Billboard* Music Awards in Las Vegas.

with Steve Aoki and Designer, its first RIAA-certified platinum single, and Blackpink and Dua Lipa's "Kiss and Make Up," which broke into the Hot 100 in 2018 despite not being promoted as a single.

"The general U.S. public has had a growing curiosity for K-pop, but it wasn't until we saw collaborations between Korean and Western artists [that] we saw it permeate mainstream press and social media," says Eddie Nam of Los Angeles-based EN Management, who manages the singer (his brother) Eric Nam and hip-hop trio Epik High internationally, and also consults for Seoul-based creative collective AXIS. Still, "too many times people have assumed that their success in Asia will directly [translate to] the States, and that just isn't the case."

The K-pop world has always thrived in digital spaces, but as its presence grew on social media in recent years (in 2018, K-pop artists and related content were referred to in 5.3 billion tweets globally, according to Twitter) and digital music platforms multiplied, audiences beyond fan cohorts had the chance to catch up. "As more music listeners were adapting to digital/online platforms to listen to music, they were also led to discover new artists and music," says SM Entertainment USA managing director Dominique Rodriguez. SM manages K-pop acts including girl group Red Velvet and boy band NCT 127, both of whom have booked

North American tours in 2019 (Red Velvet just completed a short run of theater dates).

Spotify reports that K-pop's share of listening has grown about 65 percent annually since 2015, and Apple Music had year-over-year growth of 86 percent in the United States between 2017 and 2018 alone. Last year, Pandora Music's K-Pop Girl Groups station grew over 182 percent in year-to-year listens, while its K-Pop Boy Bands station rose by 90 percent.

With that expanded listenership at their disposal, K-pop artists and the companies that steer their careers are approaching the U.S. market differently. Collaborations are now more carefully considered, says Nam, rather than simply "smashing big names together and expecting a song to chart instantly" as was popular in the mid-2000s and early 2010s. He also suggests that BTS' dedication to touring frequently in the United States (the group just announced three additional stadium shows to its 12 recent American dates) is influencing other acts: Over a dozen Korean artists will bring their tours stateside in the first half of 2019, including Blackpink, which will also perform at Coachella in April.

"The U.S. music industry is ultra competitive," says Nam. "To compete, you have to play the game: radio shows, TV appearances, touring. You have to put in the work to see the fruits of your labor."

—TAMAR HERMAN

the group "the modern Spice Girls" — lately the band has been less concerned with appearing perfect, both onstage and off. "We always wanted to be out there, to be more true to ourselves and a little more free," says Jennie. "Even we can get things wrong sometimes. We want to just show them the real us."

Jennie and Lisa do just that when I ask how they expect to be received as rappers in America. Lisa lets out an embarrassed groan, withdrawing into her fleece. She has loved hip-hop since childhood and is obsessed with Tyga ("I love his swag," she says, blushing). But she and Jennie seem well aware that a group of Asian women adopting a style

pioneered by black American artists might be a hard sell for some stateside listeners who are keenly attuned to debates about cultural appropriation.

"Me and Lisa don't talk about it out loud, but I know we have this big pressure," says Jennie, who adds that she studied artists like Lauryn Hill and TLC when she first started rapping. She looks across the room at Lisa: "She's going to kill it." Lisa just scrunches up her face.

That kind of vulnerability may be what ultimately endears Blackpink to an American pop audience. "The artists that are the most successful in these situations are really authentic with how they can relate to a coming-of-age experience"

in their music, says Goldenvoice's Rosenbluth. "There's a certain amount of authenticity to Blackpink that I really love. The dedication is heartfelt."

Back at the showcase, the band finishes its set with the reggaeton-tinged "Forever Young," featuring an intricately choreographed, hair-flipping dance break. As the beat reaches its booming climax, the bandmembers whip toward each other and strike a statuesque pose with their hands on their hips, just in time for the music to stop. They hold still for a moment as the lights dim, then drop their arms and turn toward each other, catching their breath and grinning like four young women who can't quite believe they're here. ●