

THE FUTURE *of* MUSIC ISSUE

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# BTS

→ The Nonstop  
Triumphs of the  
World's Biggest Band





## The Triumph of BTS

THIS IS A very serious and deep question," says RM, the 26-year-old leader of the world's biggest band. He pauses to think. We're talking about utopian and dystopian futures, about how the boundary-smashing, hegemony-overturning global success of his group, the wildly talented seven-member South

Korean juggernaut [BTS](#), feels like a glimpse of a new and better world, of an interconnected 21st century actually living up to its promise.

BTS' downright magical levels of charisma, their genre-defying, sleek-but-personal music, even their casually nontoxic, skin-care-intensive brand

of masculinity — every bit of it feels like a visitation from some brighter, more hopeful timeline. What RM is currently pondering, however, is how all of it contrasts with a darker landscape all around them, particularly the horrifying recent wave of anti-Asian violence and discrimination across a global diaspora.

“We are outliers,” says RM, “and we came into the American music market and enjoyed this incredible success.” In 2020, seven years into their career, BTS’ first English-language single, the irresistible “Dynamite,” hit Number One, an achievement so singular it prompted a congratulatory statement from South Korea’s president, Moon Jae-in. The nation has long been deeply invested in its outsize cultural success beyond its borders, known as the Korean Wave.

“Now, of course, there is no utopia,” RM continues. “There’s a light side; there’s always going to be a dark side. The way we think is that everything that we do, and our existence itself, is contributing to the hope for leaving this xenophobia, these negative things, behind. It’s our hope, too, that people in the minority will draw some energy and strength from our existence. Yes, there’s xenophobia, but there are also a lot of people who are very accepting...The fact that we have faced success in the United States is very meaningful in and of itself.”

At the moment, RM is in an acoustically treated room at his label’s headquarters in Seoul, wearing a white medical mask to protect a nearby translator, a black bucket hat, and a black hoodie from the Los Angeles luxury label Fear of God. As RM has had to explain too many times on U.S. talk shows, he taught himself his fluent English via bingeing *Friends* DVDs. Still, he makes understandable use of the interpreter when the conversation gets complex.

RM is a fan of complexity. He was on a path toward an elite university education before a love of hip-hop, first sparked by a Korean group, Epik High, detoured him into superstardom. Bang Si-hyuk, the cerebral, intense-yet-avuncular mogul-producer who founded BTS’ record company, Big Hit Entertainment (now [HYBE](#)), signed RM first, in 2010, and gradually formed BTS around the rapper’s talent and magnetism. “When I first met RM,” says Bang, “I felt a sense of duty that I must help him grow to become a great artist after acknowledging his musical talents and ways of thinking.”

BY [BRIAN HIATT](#)

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