

"BTS: Burn the Stage": An Encore Review of Episodes 1 & 2

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K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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It has been seven years since BTS released their YouTube Red docu-series, "BTS: Burn the Stage." In 2018, I reviewed each episode weekly, before retiring them. Since then, readers have periodically asked if I would share them again, especially now as we wait for the septet's much-awaited 2026 comeback. And I am happy to oblige.

FWIW: These encore posts will *not* replace any new newsletters. Rather, they'll supplement them weekly most likely.



"BTS: Burn the Stage": Episodes 1 & 2

☆☆☆½ (out of ☆☆☆☆)

When “BTS: Burn the Stage” premiered on March 28, 2018, it didn’t disappoint. Viewers were introduced to the seven-man Korean band, which has broken barriers worldwide.

It would’ve been easy to dwell on their accolades. Instead, the docu-series answered the question, “What would it be like to be a fly on the wall when the band members are together?”

What “Burn the Stage” shows viewers is that being a part of BTS is fun and amazing. But, when it’s not, it’s filled with doubt, fatigue and fear. And it’s this willingness to let people hear their disagreements and watch them give up control that makes this concept so intriguing.

One of the reasons K-Pop has become so popular is because it’s dependable. Fans know what they’ll get: harmonious voices, perfectly choreographed dancing and cutting-edge fashion.

But moreso than visuals and charm, it’s BTS’ wealth of songs that’s its selling point. Their repertoire ranges from lyrics filled with teenage rage, to thoughtful compositions that literally address life and death. It’s not a coincidence that the group has been credited with creating music that has helped countless fans navigate their way through the challenging aspects of their lives.

It is difficult to explain why this first episode was so moving for me. Certainly, there is the aspect of seeing Asian Representation so beautifully presented, and in a manner that doesn’t exoticize these young men as strange creatures from a foreign land.

Forty-five years ago, NBC tried to create mainstream fame for the Japanese duo, Pink Lady. The women, who didn’t speak English, were forced to learn lines phonetically and joke around with their co-star, comedian Jeff Altman. Episodes often ended with the women wearing bikinis in hot tubs. The show was a hot mess that was quickly canceled.

With “Burn the Stage,” BTS speaks Korean and aren’t apologetic about it. Yes, RM can speak English better than many of their American viewers. But the conceit is that if you want to truly know who they are, you need to hear them speaking their minds in

their native tongue. There, too, is the implication that the band is worth going to the trouble of reading sub-titles.

Ep2 You already have the answer | BTS: Burn the Stage



The best documentaries will give you a peek into the subject's life and present something new. But it will also take what's already known and add a unique element. As I watched this docu-series, I thought about three documentaries that I reviewed years ago: Madonna's *Truth or Dare*, Neil Young's *The Year of the Horse* and Chet Baker's *Let's Get Lost*. Even the mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* delves into the absurdity of life on the road, but in a way that rings true.

When they began filming this series more than a year ago, there was no guarantee that BTS would become this successful. And yet, here they are, which makes their vulnerability that much more tangible.

Early on, RM and Suga — the two main rappers — discuss what they hope to accomplish with this series. They both agree that they need to be honest.

Suga: *[Fans] think we show our true lives, but we filter. We hide a lot of things. I hide my weaknesses. We need to get rid of that and show them the raw side.*

RM: *I was lucky to find what I wanted to do early in life. Some days, I won't want to work. People think I work all the time. I have these other sides, but if I let them see it, [people] might not like me.*

But it was Jin, the group's eldest member at 25, whose simple wish spoke volumes: "My dream is to perform with these guys a long time."

One of RM's favorite books is Herman Hesse's "Demian: The Story of Emil Sinclair's Youth." I am not embarrassed to admit that the first time I read it as a young teen, I didn't get it. But what I will always remember is that the titular character struggles between a world of illusion and reality. And it isn't till much later in the book that he comes to the self realization of who he really is.

I imagine that for the members of BTS, presenting an idealized version of their real selves was par for the course. But with "Burn the Stage," they have come to terms with who they truly are and are confident enough to show it to the public.

Airdates: The eight-episode series premiered on March 28 and ran through May 9, 2018, on YouTube Red.

This review has been updated since it was originally published on March 28, 2018.

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