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Music

The 54 Best K-Pop Songs of 2021

BY TEEN VOGUE

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For *Teen Vogue's* second annual Best K-pop list, we decided to focus on the music we loved this year. In this often bleak, tumultuous time, the best K-pop songs of 2021 gave us

a rare light: Energy! Chaos! New words! Meanwhile, the artists who created them continued to outdo themselves with one immaculate performance after another.

Related: [The 79 Best K-Pop Songs of 2022](#)

Last year, we wrote about [the complexity of calling K-pop a genre](#): "Can K-pop be considered a 'genre' in the traditional sense? Is it a way of pinning household name artists in? Or is it a way of bolstering a rising tide?" Those questions hold true this year, too, and it's part of the reason we decided to celebrate the songs that shaped us in 2021, rather than more general moments. The music on this list encompasses pop, hip-hop, alternative, indie, R&B, mostly by Korean or Korean American artists, or Asian performers who were shaped by the K-pop industry. While there's no perfect solution to the genre problem, we hope this list serves as a reminder of the breadth of what "K-pop" can sound like: noisy, precise, poppy, powerful, minimalist, maximalist, smooth, beautiful, memorable.

Below, relive the year with the 54 best K-pop songs of 2021, chosen by 54 contemporary journalists and writers and shared in chronological order.

DPR Ian, DPR Live, and CL Make an Iconic Team on "No Blueberries"

Though released as a late 2020 single before finding its home on DPR Ian's *Moodswings In This Order*, "No Blueberries" proved to be a collaboration we didn't know we needed. Featuring labelmate DPR Live and K-pop royalty CL, "No Blueberries" expresses the facade we give to our anxieties and obsessions through jazzy piano riffs and soft percussion that contrast with the darkness of the lyrics. The indie track takes cues from R&B and hip-hop while staying true to Dream Perfect Regime's knack for experimentation. Considering their previous work, I'm looking forward to what the DPR team has up next for fans. — [Nnehkai Agbor](#), *Freelance Writer*

The Epic Highs of “Rosario”

There's a reason “Rosario” by Epik High, CL, and Zico topped my Spotify year-end playlist: it's really f*cking good. The epic collab by some of the most influential voices in Korean pop, rap, and hip-hop is so multifaceted that you could listen to it a hundred times and find a new phrase to stick on every time. On a structural level, a winding guitar melody and rolling trap beat set up a prime environment for endless swagger. Each musician then brings in a unique, ferocious stage presence, spitting out lines like “I paved the way for everyone that is paving the way” and “I am a legend and I'm here to stay.” It's a mission statement, an ethos, a way of life — a firm assertion of global dominance. — *P. Claire Dodson, Senior Entertainment Editor at Teen Vogue*

CIX Turns a Chorus Into a Personality Trait With "Cinema"

You ever hear a chorus for the first time and think, "Oh no, this is going to be my entire personality for a while"? Enter "Cinema" by CIX. Dropping in February when everything felt Especially Bad, the retro synth-pop tune was a wistful balm for the pain of losing a summer lots of us didn't even realize had passed by. Despite the rookie group having a talented rap contingent, "Cinema" leans fully into the quintet's vocal prowess, with their sweet and airy harmonies blending verses into bridges into (painfully catchy) choruses with barely a strain. Ten months since its release, if you can make it through the day without half-singing "Cinema Cinema Cinemaaaaa" to yourself, then you're a stronger person than I. — *Lucy Ford, Culture Writer*

In the Doom and Gloom of 2021, the Bright Light That Is SHINee

“Don’t Call Me” marked the much anticipated and longed-for return of our beloved SHINee. Veterans in the industry, Onew, Key, Minho, and Taemin gave the hip-hop dance track that polished yet refreshing SHINee twist, creating a song that remained at the top of my playlist for all of 2021. “Don’t Call Me,” shows once again that SHINee’s artistry and innovation are limitless. Its success commercially and critically suggests that the heyday of second-generation artists may not always lie in days past. Most of all, “Don’t Call Me” is a damn good song, and it let the world know that SHINee’s back. —

Stacy Nam, Digital Host & Producer

Sunmi's Catwoman-inspired "Tail"

Lee Sunmi has never once let us down, ever since her solo debut in 2013 with the *Full Moon* EP, while she was still technically a member of Wonder Girls. Her career has been a series of devastatingly perfect singles, one after the other, and her first release of 2021, *Tail*, is no exception. A Catwoman-inspired moment with Sunmi's trademark double entendre lyrics and a captivating choreography sprinkled with a dash of queerness, *Tail* shows off all the best of what the darker and more mysterious side of what Sunmi-pop has to offer. Like all her other releases, "Tail" slotted right into a Sunmi-shaped spot in the K-pop industry that couldn't be filled by anyone else. — *Benedetta Geddo, Writer and Content Creator*

Rosé Introduces Her Solo Soundscape With "On the Ground"

There's always been a shadow chasing the sweetness of Rosé's voice. It's this hint of huskiness that tempers her solo debut's decadent flair – a shimmering slice of EDM-pop, the heavenly highs of the chorus fuelled by that bittersweet bite of a bassline. The fairytale narrative of Rosé's dizzying rise to pop's stratosphere is haunted by a nod to the lonely tightrope she and her fellow idols walk among the stars. But Rosé anchors her sonic identity with quiet confidence. The gorgeously whimsical music video echoes the vivid clarity of her vocals, dusted with just enough candor to keep Blinks wanting more.

— *Hannah Weiss, Music & Culture Writer*

WOODZ Embraces Rock With Smoldering “FEEL LIKE”

At 25 years old, the charismatic Cho Seung Youn has already been a member of UNIQ and the doomed X1, disbanded after one EP thanks to reported shady corporate dealings. Persevering with a will of reinforced steel, his present incarnation is as the genre-hopping soloist Woodz, who could have easily left this single in a delicate, pop-R&B space. But this year, rock found favor with his formidable songwriting talent, and thus “Feel Like” is given life as a smoldering, blues-infused cut whose taut guitar riff curls and slides beneath Woodz's voice like the ultimate temptation. Quite frankly, who are we to refuse? — *Taylor Glasby, **Writer***

A Weeekly Single That Never Leaves Your Brain

You know those sad, black and white animations that turn into color when things become bright and happy? Well, that's the power of Weeekly's "After School," especially in the midst of our jaded pandemic lives. When the first eight counts of this song start and the chorus hits, it's like sunshine and rainbows making you actually want to "우리 skateboard 위로 ('we're on our skateboards') the day away. The song is so sticky that it can replace your 5-hour energy drink, and you can go about your day with no worries. (Let's not forget **the dance challenge**, too.) The pop sounds and harmonies sprinkled throughout "After School" further proves Weeekly as a fourth-gen act that has completely charmed with their happy-go-lucky personas. — *Lai Frances, Multimedia Journalist & Host*

Jessi Reigns in “What Type of X”

With the ring of an electric guitar, Jessi announced that she was back with a bang in early 2020. Co-written with Psy, her 2021 single “What Type of X” embodies Jessi’s confidence within contemporary K-pop. It’s simultaneously an embrace of her once-outsider status as a Queens-born rapper, as well as a showcase of just how musically talented she is: coy melodies erupt into anthemic choruses, before descending into her fiery rap verses. “I’m a different kind of beast, but it’s okayyy,” purrs Jessi on the song. It’s a celebration of and by a woman who knows just how good it feels to be at the top of her game. — *Katie Goh, Freelance Journalist*

Chung Ha Reinforces Her Global Impact on "Demente"

East-meets-West collabs are pretty much the norm now in the K-pop space. A little bit less common — though arguably superior — are those done with Latinx artists. This year, Chung Ha won her honorary Latina title by not only working with Puerto Rican star Guaynaa for “Demente,” but she also sang the full track in near-perfect Spanish — which not many in K-pop have done so far. And while many of these cross-cultural pairings can seem random at times, the more we think about Chung Ha with the “Rebota” singer, the more it makes sense: two stars in their respective music markets on the rise with global appeal. Chung Ha didn’t ask to be born Latina, she just gave us a bop, iconic lyrics, and was adopted in the process. — *Alexis Hodoyán-Gastélum*, Music Editor at Remezcla and Co-founder of KultScene

IU Captures an “Ivory-Colored Spring Climax’ to Her 20s in “Lilac”

Maybe it’s just us, but knowing that IU turned 30 this year came with some heartache — a lot of us realized just how much time had passed for us as well. Somewhere between her spectacular high notes on “Good Day” and the twisting tragedy of “Love Poem,” we all grew up. It would have been a sad moment too, had IU not stomped her feet and declared that the goodbye to an era of her life would not be anything less than celebratory and perfect. That, precisely, is the tear-inducing beauty of “Lilac” – there has never been a more “perfect” and “glorious” goodbye. She compares her time in her 20s to a relationship, with this goodbye being a perfect farewell that she’ll treasure forever. Yes, one day, as we grow old and gray, our memories of “the faces and scents of today” might fade, but there will never be any regrets about how it all played out. There is no doubt that IU is a master of her craft and a one-of-a-kind talent, but “Lilac” sure has a special place in our hearts, if only for the bittersweet aftertaste it leaves on our tongues. — *Tanu I. Raj, Writer*

Jackson Wang's Nostalgic Heartbreak Anthem "LMLY"

This year saw the continued rise of Jackson Wang's solo career, with January marking his departure from Korean label JYP Entertainment after 10 years. Jackson made a name for himself as a rapper in the Korean music industry with the support of his former group GOT7, and the influence of his decade as a K-pop idol continues to be seen and heard in his solo releases. "LMLY," which stands for Leave Me Loving You, is a synth-dance-pop track with an '80s sound and a '90s Hong Kong film-inspired music video (directed by Jackson) that tells the story of unrequited love and nostalgic yearning. With a backdrop of neon lights that are the perfect amount of kitschy and lyrics that are well-suited for screaming along to, "LMLY" was the 2021 anthem for those of us with broken hearts who wanted a reason to dance anyway. — *Vandana Pawa, Culture Writer*

We Need to Talk About Prince of Thirst Baekhyun's "All I Got"

Among the many things that didn't change this year — soft pants, existential dread — was **Byun Baekhyun ruining my life**. Despite the fact that the 29-year-old had to enlist in May (cry), he decided to grow a mullet and test our blood pressure one more time with March's *Bambi* EP. At this point, we know all too well that the man has a Ph.D. in horny R&B banger, and with each release, he gets closer to tenure. But in exactly 10 seconds, B-side "All I Got" mainlines straight to your *foghorn noise.* It's science, it's witchcraft, it'll read a eulogy at my funeral. But worst of all, we know this isn't even close to all Baekhyun's got. And that remains the scariest constant of all. — *Natalie Morin, Culture Writer*

Hoshi's Enticing First Solo Mixtape "Spider"

“Spider” sees **SEVENTEEN’s Hoshi** prowling the music video’s minimalist set with theatrical intensity and an animality befitting his stage name: a mashup of *horangi* and *shison*, or “tiger’s gaze.” Yet here he momentarily eschews this (**tightly held**) big cat agenda for a darker, more sensual persona. Kalimba plucks, finger snaps, snares, and a slinky bassline weave a layered yet lightweight web of sound behind Hoshi’s cutting whisper as he vacillates between his predatory dance and the witless pleas of prey. “Must be intoxicated by your poison / Can’t feel any anxiety,” Hoshi muses in his breathy falsetto — and there’s a lethal sweetness in the uncertainty. — *Abby Webster, Freelance Writer*

STAYC’S “ASAP” Dominates TikTok

Released in April of 2021, “ASAP” launched rookie group STAYC into the forefront of everyone’s FYPs and officially cemented STAYC's footing in the industry. It's the best of the year in its challenge against the genre; more than a **viral trend** or readily **disposable sound**, the catchy choreography, visual energy, and sweet-not-saccharine vocals giving it a “Call Me Maybe” feeling in the way it was widely reposted all over the Internet. It's

bubblegum pop we're going to chew on for a while. STAYC girls, it's going down. — *Steffi Cao, Trends Editor & Daebak Weekly Writer, BuzzFeed*

Chung Ha Pulls Off an Iconic Dance Performance in "Stay Tonight"

More than a song about individual desire, Chung Ha's "Stay Tonight" immerses us in a living network of collectivity. Its choreography integrates waacking and voguing, street dances originating in 1970s-1980s Black and brown, LGBTQ disco clubs in LA, and ballrooms in NYC. With this queer visual language, Chung Ha's dancers — including members of [La Chica](#), [House of Love](#), and [Coming Out](#) — fan into her skirt, roll in waves underneath her, conversing together while remaining their full, expressive selves. Watching Chung Ha makes you want to move through the world with that same effortless ease, propelled forward by the brilliant friends behind you. — *Victoria Huynh, Writer*

The Playful Obsession of BIBI'S "BAD SAD AND MAD"

Singer-songwriter BIBI has been on the K-indie scene for quite a while now: she placed second on the reality talent show *The Fan* in 2019, and subsequently released a slew of hit singles including the now-iconic *Cigarette and Condom*. BIBI is constantly pushing the boundaries between the personal and the performable: "BAD SAD AND MAD," the lead single off of this year's five-track EP *Life is a Bi...*, is a lustful confession of attraction nestled between trap-like beats and sultry vocals. The lyrics themselves are a witty allusion to the consuming nature of desire: "You blued my bruise, pink me with ties....you red my mind." In a year filled with wishes, it was a perfect addition to my playlists. —

Awuor Onguru, Poet and Writer, Nairobi, Kenya

BIBI Teaches Us to Survive in Our Own Way

“Life Is A Bi...” is essentially about a constant internal existential crisis. It’s simultaneously about regretting and reflecting on the b*tch that is life, which makes it the perfect song for the times we’re living in. Sonically, the song opens with a sober xylophone beat, and BIBI’s vocals gently roll in, starting soft and gentle, before slowly transitioning to her usual angsty self. Sometimes life gets hard and you feel wronged, but the only way to deal with it is to survive in your own way. — *Bora, K-pop Writer and Podcast Host, [Hwaiting! Words](#)*

Lee Mu-jin Shows His Charm With Breakout Hit “Traffic Light”

Within a year, Lee Mu-jin has gone from a no-name (literally — he rose to fame as “Singer number 63” on the JTBC show *Sing Again*) to a major year-end award contender, largely thanks to hit song “Traffic Light.” This pop earworm has achieved massive popularity and chart success with its juxtaposition of a bright, sunny chorus with more wistful verses. These elements reflect Lee’s pensive self-written lyrics, which take a traffic light as a metaphor for the “chaotic” feeling of being in one’s early twenties. It’s accompanied by a **music video** that captures how uncertainty and hesitation are intertwined with moments of joy — a charming and reassuring message for listeners navigating their own twenties (and beyond). — *Claire H. Evans, Writer*

aespa Takes K-pop to the Next Level

Perhaps my biggest flex of 2021 is that I knew aespa's "Next Level" was going to be a hit the first time I heard it. For some, the song is an acquired taste — too disjointed, too nonsensical ("that's my naevis, it's my naevis"), too odd — but that's what makes it so perfect. In a global musical landscape that often follows the same syncopated structure, "Next Level" is an electrifying punch to the gut. Rhythmically, you never know where Karina, Giselle, Winter, and NingNing are headed. It takes all of SM Entertainment and producer Yoo Young-jin's signature stylistic elements (the **bass slide!** the unexpected beat drop! the vocal growls!) and brings them to the *nex-tuh lev-ul* (the **enunciation** is key). Seriously: It's one of the **longest-charting girl group songs** in South Korea's *history*, and it has everyone from **Monsta X** to **Twice** to **BTS's Jungkook** under its spell. It's a funky little delight, a sonic explosion of ferocity and possibility. "Next Level" is the future. And you don't even need to travel to Kwangya to experience it. — *Crystal Bell, Deputy Culture Editor, Mashable*

You'll Never Get the Keys to Taemin's Lock

From the minute the piano instrumental starts in “Advice,” with Taemin tattooed up in a ski mask with hands covered in ink, we should have known that he had reached his final form of evolution. The *maknae* of SHINee gave fans one last parting gift before his military enlistment in the form of a head-bumping song over an R&B trap beat that made us all want to stand up and testify. The MV successfully highlights everything that we adore about Taemin: the intricate dance moves and impeccable genderless fashion (where can I find that Supreme sports bra?) and a haunting video concept that shows why he is the ultimate idol's idol. — *Natasha Mulenga, Author & Journalist*

BTS's Billboard Behemoth, "Butter"

For ARMY, there can only be one song that defined 2021: BTS's pop behemoth "Butter." Ten comfortable weeks atop the Billboard Hot 100 and several momentous achievements — including the group's second Grammy nomination — all culminated in the last days of November, when countless virtual stages became, finally, an opportunity for BTS to perform "Butter" in front of fans at four sold-out stadium shows in Los Angeles. Flurries of confetti and breathtaking dance breaks — and, once, a surprise appearance by remix collaborator Megan Thee Stallion — all intensified one exhilarating moment. RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jungkook in formation at the center of SoFi Stadium, spelling out ARMY with their bodies, as they finally got to hear one line, in particular, screamed back to them by a crowd more than 50,000 strong: "Got ARMY right behind us when we say so." Whether it's awards won, or records broken, or emotions felt and shared by the members and millions of their fans, the mammoth success of "Butter" proves they really, really do. — *Ellie Bate, Entertainment and Culture Writer*

TXT Enters a New Era...

The release of “0X1=LOVESONG (I Know I Love You)” as the title track of *The Chaos Chapter: Freeze* marked a before and after in TXT’s journey. Sonically, it was truly the start of a new era for the group, which they have since continued in *Fight or Escape*. Throughout 2021, this song has been the gift that keeps on giving, and we’ve gotten multiple stages and multiple versions, too. The original with Seori reigns supreme, but the Japanese version with YOASOBI’s Ikuta Lilas is a close second. The list of praises I have for this song is almost as long as its name — if not longer — but I was told to keep this short. — *Sara Delgado, Culture Writer and Editor*

..and Runs From Romance in the Loveliest Way Possible

TXT has had a busy year, releasing their long-anticipated second studio album, *The Chaos Chapter: Freeze* in May, followed by a repackaged album called *The Chaos Chapter: Fight or Escape*, and a Japanese EP called *Chaotic Wonderland*. The group is known for dosing out chart-topping music and experimenting with countless genres, but “Anti-Romantic” was an unexpected hit. It’s the perfect opener for *The Chaos Chapter: Freeze*, allowing the guys’ soft but strong vocals to shine on an electronic pop track that’s easy on the ears. Though the song is about running away from love, MOAs did exactly the opposite with this track. It quickly blew up on Tiktok, even earning its own dance challenge. — *Ashlee Mitchell, Music and Culture Writer*

MAMAMOO Close One Chapter and Begin Another

Over the course of their seven-year career, MAMAMOO — comprising singers Solar, Moonbyul, Wheein, and Hwasa — have consistently made a name for themselves with their powerful lyrics and their distinctive style. In contrast to their usual catchy earworms, “Where Are We Now” is a quiet pause that looks back on how far they have come and the journey that has brought them together. The song is even more meaningful because it was the last album they released before Wheein joined another company. Soulful and hauntingly nostalgic, “Where Are We Now” is the definitive background track for all your emo moments. — *Hannah Abraham, Freelance Writer*

TWICE Goes Full Song of the Summer

TWICE's "Alcohol-Free" was the song of the summer, and months later, I still turn to the tropical track to lift my spirits on a cold morning. This bossa nova-inspired comeback perfectly melds their cute history with their mature evolution, with refreshing lyrics comparing the intoxication of love to the effects of a few drinks: smiling for no reason, staying up all night, everything feeling easy. Add on the impressive choreography – Mina bartending on a counter made of members! – and "Alcohol-Free" stands out as TWICE's best song in a jam-packed year. — *Quinci LeGardye, Culture Writer*

The Postmodern Masterpiece of SEVENTEEN's "GAM3 BO1"

It would be a glaring omission to write a Best of 2021 list and not include the most 2021 song released this year, SEVENTEEN's "GAM3 BO1," a song about growing up online, with a beat to match that sensory overload we all know too well. Composed by member Vernon along with frequent collaborators, the song has a hyperpop sound pioneered by artists like Charli XCX and SOPHIE — which is the perfect fit for lyrics like "8-bit coins, I was chasing. Now there are bitcoins, I'll be mining until 2077." References to Zoom and NFTs round out our year spent together on the Internet, and depending on how seriously you choose to interpret the lyrics, we either have a faithful portrait of 2021's zeitgeist or maybe the closest thing in K-pop to a postmodern masterpiece. — *Hannah Zwick, Culture Writer*

ONEWE Takes to the Sky in Electric B-side "AuRoRa"

A lead single is only as good as the album it lives on — namely, its B-side tracks. An artist's job is first to lure the listener in with the promotional single and then completely dazzle them with the rest of the album. Not only did ONEWE understand this assignment in *Planet Nine: Alter Ego*, but they took it to new heights with "AuRoRa," a B-side that's just as electrifying as it is ethereal. As a fan-favorite among loyal fans and newcomers, "AuRoRa" is emotion in its rawest form: a force of lightning infused with the softest touch of care and delicacy. — *Chyenne Tatum, Senior Culture Writer, EnVi Media*

BTS's Upbeat and Uplifting "Permission to Dance"

As the pandemic dragged on into 2021, BTS continued to do what they do best: provide comfort. Beyond being a bouncy chart-topper with an MV straight out of a musical, "Permission to Dance" is a much-needed reminder that we *don't* need permission to celebrate what matters to us. As expected from BTS, this idea of embracing what we love — with or without permission — is perfectly timed. After over a year of disruption from the pandemic, the release of "Permission to Dance" paved the way for a **virtual challenge**, an **online concert**, **in-person concerts** for the first time in two years, and, most importantly, a message that unites and empowers people around the world. — *Katie Li, Freelance Writer*

A.C.E Engulf the Senses With “SPARK”

Constantly raising the bar in a year that gave us *SIREN : DAWN* and “Changer” (deserving of a daily listening ritual to stock up on serotonin), A.C.E also created an OST for the *Boys’ Love* drama, *Light On Me*. “SPARK” leaps into life with a jangly guitar, a musical mimicry of romance bewitching the body. A.C.E encapsulates, through each member’s unique vocal color, the moment when every cell in your body is fizzing with excitement. Chan and Donghun lay down feather-light vocals, airy and delicate. Wow anchors the track with his alluring timbre, a base that Byeongkwan’s lilting tenor builds upon. Fearless leader Jun ties it all together with the same fervor that he’ll bring to *Tinted With You*, his own forthcoming BL drama. “SPARK” has served to further enshrine A.C.E as a safe space for their queer fans, owing to the quintet’s thrill at singing for a romance between two male leads. In August, Jun told *Teen Vogue*: “Just like how all of our fans, CHOICE, are different in their own special ways, we know that there [are] a range of different ways to love among all kinds of people in this world which we acknowledge and respect.” So much joy is packed into 3:47 of music, we’re spoiled for choice, and CHOICE have once again been spoiled. — *K-Ci Williams, Entertainment Writer*

Red Velvet's Blitz of a B-side, "Pose"

Vivacious, magnetic, and zesty, "Pose" by Red Velvet serves as both an uptempo anthem for the girls and gays in addition to an exuberant return of RV. Over punchy electronic beats and fluctuating drums, the galvanizing lyrics call for self-empowerment — to revel in that feeling of knowing you look good. With flashy and bright choreography to match, the girls give me affirmation that I am the main character in life. Not to mention the B-side gave us **this** GIF of Irene, so perhaps Red Velvet's 602-day hiatus was worth it after all. — *Anton Rohr, Freelance Writer*

TXT Drops a Soundtrack for the Restless Heart

TXT's "LO\$ER = LOVER" is an anthem that overwhelmingly encapsulates the unexpected, yet highly inevitable oscillations between extreme joy and sorrow that many of us have still not yet learned how to navigate this past year. Straying from their typical sound represented in fan favorites like "Anti-Romantic" and "Blue Hour," the five-piece boy band channeled the world's growing angst into a melodic-rock adjacent ride whose tire marks leave a clear-cut tread on the mind. With lyrics like, "I say run... Laugh like you've gone mad... Time to say goodbye to tears" and "In a car colored gray I'm running away... Beyond this f*cked up world... My hand clutching yours," listeners are reminded that you're never too cool to love a little harder, breathe in the essence of life a little deeper, and take everything that's got your name written on it without looking back. —

Rianne Akindele, Music and Culture Writer

"After We Ride," The Crowning Jewel of Brave Girls' Revival

The volcanic re-emergence of Brave Girls is — unquestionably — one of the defining K-pop moments of 2021. After their single “Rollin’” (released in 2017) suddenly topped the South Korean music charts propelled by a **fan-edited video**, the group that was on the brink of disbandment grabbed this awakened fame with both hands and went on to conquer the summer throne for themselves. Enter “After We Ride,” a follow-up to their 2020 title track “We Ride” (which was going to be **their possible last comeback**), that delineates the echoes of a broken relationship, offering a lyrical picture of Brave Girls dwelling with a brew of regrets. Their gorgeous vocal performance adds to the pathos, and the mesmerizing retro synths and accompanying electric guitar pulsate unrestricted. What makes this song powerful, though, is the poignant dichotomy where remorse clashes with finding solace. It’s an oddly satisfying contrast that takes the meaning of “After We Ride” to another dimension, making it an emblem of Brave Girls’ belated triumph and not just another break-up anthem. — *Ivana E. Morales, Freelance Culture Journalist*

Key and Taeyeon Lean into Longing on “Hate That...”

In a year where the world is getting back to normal one moment, but then the next a new COVID-19 variant begins fluttering about, a song about hating someone who has moved on from you and is finding happiness in a far away otherplace feels a bit spot on. While Key and best friend Taeyeon's “Hate That...” is more about love than pandemic weariness, the romantic mid-tempo pop song overflows with longing and desire in the most compelling of ways. It may not be the biggest dance banger out there, or the most TikTok-inducing song, but “Hate That...” is comforting and immensely listenable in the best of ways. — *Alex Tobias, Writer*

STAYC Maintains Their Unpredictability With "Stereotype"

While many veteran groups are known for one concept, newcomers STAYC have set an early high bar by being anything but predictable. The bubbly, lilting "Stereotype" is no exception. Like the delightfully odd "ASAP" that skyrocketed the girl group earlier this year, "Stereotype" is a product of songwriting duo Black Eyed Pilseung (Apink's "Eung Eung," Twice's "Fancy"). Yet "Stereotype" breaks from the mold: The verses are hooky, but its chorus understated. The feminine concept still carries their signature quirk. A year into their career, STAYC refuse to be under anyone's thumb - and the best part is having no idea what they'll do next. — *Kika Chatterjee, Musician Philanthropy Consultant*

CL Brings Energy, Power, Chemistry on “Spicy” Remix

After unpacking the load that piled up during the long hiatus with *In the Name of Love*, CL was finally ready to make a new beginning: *ALPHA*, her very first studio album since her debut in 2009. The lead single is “SPICY,” and the official remix carries the best statement of her identity. Following her mentor **John Malkovich**’s narration, the frenzied track made by Holly & Baauer kicks in. CL exclaims about the “SPICY” tang of Korea with Omega Sapien, sokodomo, and Lil Cherry – three emerging Korean rappers who have been raised as Third Culture Kids like her. She performs alongside fierce female dancers – an allusion to the beginnings of her musical life – from the dance show *Street Woman Fighter*. It clearly stands out as the anthem for “The Baddest Female in Seoul City” (a quote from 2NE1’s “Please Don’t Go”) who have been pushing the boundaries of K-pop. Help yourself to this ENERGY, POWER, CHEMISTRY. — *Harim Choi a.k.a. Squib, Editor at **Idology***

Purple Kiss Show Off Artistic Duality On Edgy “Zombie”

Encapsulating their trademark feminine but fierce energy, Purple Kiss show a new side to themselves on electro-funk track “Zombie,” which compares chasing and being chased by someone you like to playing tag with a zombie. Co-written by member Yuki alongside ONEWE’s CyA and rapper Basick, the track is a clever exploration of romance with an undead twist, led by aggressive basslines and funky guitars. Infused with equal amounts of powerful charisma and cutesy charm, the track brings humorous and vibrant vibes framed by a punk edge. Taking a strange metaphor that likens love to zombies, Purple Kiss weave intrigue on the track, accompanied by innovative visuals punctuated by powerful choreo for a perfectly polished showcase of artistic duality. — *Malvika Padin, Journalist*

Lee Hi and Hip Hop Legend Yoon Mi Rae Dip Into Disco With “Red Lipstick”

Former YG artist Lee Hi is known for her powerful voice and an endless array of hits. With “**Red Lipstick**,” Lee Hi reminds us that she’s got a lot of talent in a tiny package, delivering a disco-inspired dance hit with a catchy chorus. What makes this song extra amazing? The second verse and post-chorus by Afro Korean rapper Yoon Mi Rae, a legend with a gorgeous raspy voice. Come for the incredible sound of the collab and stay for a music video, which features cameos from artists at Lee Hi’s label AOMG alongside hopeful messages for a post-COVID future... written in red lipstick, of course. — *Stitch, Pop Culture and Fandom Writer*

BLACKPINK's Lisa Comes Out Swinging in Solo Debut

2021 saw BLACKPINK member Lisa make her solo debut. And baby, did she show up. From teaser to official video, “Lalisa” asks: what’s my name? The multi-hyphenate has always proven she could do it all, and she hits every musical and creative note as she sings, raps, and dances. Lisa. Always. Understands. The. Assignment. Someone invite her to be a guest judge on *RuPaul's Drag Race*, because this woman knows her angles, her light, and the camera. It's like she remembers there's a living, breathing person who will watch her performance. Lisa brings it for them, for us, for you, every time. — *Erica Gerald Mason, Writer*

And She Goes Viral, Again, With “Money”

If you haven't heard Lisa's song “Money” by now, you might be living under a rock. The **hit** from her solo debut has been blasted everywhere, from clubs to TikTok to U.S. pop radio stations. From the start, this song draws the listener in with its horn-heavy hip-hop style. With lines like “everyone silent, listen to my money talk,” “Money” has all the confidence Lisa is known for. It has also gone on to break **records**, and Interscope eventually promoted it as Lisa's second **single** following “Lalisa.” Fittingly, Lisa immediately knew this was **hers** and recorded the finished product on her first take. — *Maddy Myer, Entertainment Writer*

Monsta X's "One Day" Is a Bittersweet Ode to Love

"I wish I could have made you love me," Monsta X sing in their all-English song about a breakup. "One Day" tells the story of a desolate man pining away for a relationship he's not ready to let go of just yet. The sorrowful lyrics are offset by the hypnotic music, which – frankly – is a bop. Radio really dropped the ball on this track, which features gorgeous harmonies, along with heartbreaking lyrics that may make the listener sob in commiseration. — *Jae-Ha Kim, Syndicated Columnist at the Chicago Tribune*

What's So Funny About Stray Kids' A-Class Vibes?

Stray Kids think they're cool, and maybe also a little bit cheesy. With their second full-length album *NOEASY*, the band has never been more confident in their sound, taking full advantage of the opportunity to call out critics who hide behind their screens in one of the coolest B-tracks of the year. "CHEESE" pulls no punches. The song is honest and tries to find the humor everyone else seems to see in older Stray Kids songs like "Awkward Silence," "Side Effects," and "God's Menu." "What's so funny about a headache?" they ask over a self-produced beat. Or a cawing crow? They're both great questions that Stray Kids already has the answer to — everything's a little funny when you take yourself less seriously and embrace the noise. — *Bea Vantapool, Managing Editor at Tumblr*

The Charming Enigma of NCT 127's "Sticker"

Opening with a flute sound, going into a classic K-pop hook, and seamlessly melting into an earworm chorus, this song is an enigma from the first note to the last. It creates a dissonance in the minds of the listener, which is intriguing. It's been a polarizing song amongst NCTzens, but nothing about "Sticker" is predictable, which is what makes the song so good. The "keep the listeners guessing" mentality is an ode to SM's productions past. Songs like 2nd generation's "Wolf" by EXO and "Red Light" by f(x)'s natural evolution is 3rd generation's "Sticker." It pays homage to the ahead-of-the-curve production style that SM Entertainment's tracks are known for. As polarizing as it has been, you can't deny, the song gets stuck in your head... well, like a Sticker. — *Anjana Pawa, Culture Writer*

A Road to “Fame” With JAY B and JUNNY

Popular cat boy and leader of the group GOT7, JAY B jumped genres and made his solo debut with R&B album *SOMO: FUME*. The phrase means “Style of my own,” a Korean wordplay on “소모품/somopoom, which means to consume, whereas FUME is short for perfume — he hopes to absorb everyone into the new scent of his music. After years of collaborations under different monikers and Soundcloud releases, the multi-hyphenate musician got to showcase his artistry with this release. While it was a star-studded affair with pre-release "Switch It Up" becoming undoubtedly one of the raunchiest songs of the year, it was “FAME” that took my breath away. Produced by GroovyRoom, JAY B collaborated with soloist JUNNY, and I felt I was experiencing first love and slowly falling for someone as the song progressed. “FAME” gives me those reminiscing jitters, reflecting on the memorable moments in life. The playful vibe with lively bassline, catchy instrumental, and romance-infused vocals consumed me so much it ended up as one of my top five songs on Spotify this year. — *Monica Yadav, Senior Entertainment Journalist, Bollywood Hungama*

aespa Turns Pagans Into Believers With Disruptive "Savage"

Absurd times call for absurd music, and aespa took that mission to the next level. SM's newest rookies aren't only impressive in their numbers and elaborate **AI lore**, but also in the sonic innovation that they bring. Opening with Winter's unabashed mockery in "Oh my gosh, don't you know I'm a savage," the track takes us on a cyberspace voyage with spiritual undertones. Enter: industrial synths, earworms like "get me, get me now" and "zu zu zu zu," vocal acrobatics, and a numinous bridge dedicated to naevis — "my naevis, we love you," they sing. If this sounds like an oddball smorgasbord, you are correct. As iconic as they are, aespa are also iconoclastic, defying expectations of what pop music should sound like. If this wasn't enough, "Savage" is enhanced by an ultra-modern MV and quirky, robotic choreography that pricks at those who deem K-pop too "artificial." A crowning jewel to this year's cultural landscape and best-of playlists, it hurls aespa as burgeoning leaders in the industry. As Twitter would say, æmen. — *Tássia Assis, Freelance Writer*

Bask in Your Pretty Main Character Energy With aespa's Yeppi Yeppi

“Yeppi Yeppi” is the sweeter and softer sister to the dynamic big three, “Next Level,” “Savage,” and “Black Mamba.” Those songs gave us futuristic, feminine cyberpunk energy, but we’re basking in softer territory with “Yeppi Yeppi.” This is one for the main characters, the happy and the pretty ones, as they belt in the lyrics. It’s a celebration of self-confidence and just life itself. And of course, it isn’t an aespa song without NingNing and Winter singing their hearts out or Karina and Giselle giving us a dynamic rap. —

*Bashirat Oladele, **Freelance Journalist***

In Chancellor's "Midnight," Retro Has Never Looked So Cool

"Midnight" by Korean-American singer-songwriter and producer Chancellor is quite possibly the grooviest yet most underrated bop of 2021. One of the most versatile artists in Korea today, Chancellor, whose wide-ranging musical styles span from hip-hop to R&B to pop, sings in a silky smooth falsetto reminiscent of The Weeknd throughout this disco-inspired track. The song's exhilarating **music video** is a nod to Korea's vibrant club scene and features cameo appearances by K-pop icons **Chae Yeon**, Jun Jin (of the first-generation K-pop group **Shinhwa**), and **Johan Kim** (from the pioneering Korean R&B trio Solid), as well as the legendary Korean hip-hop artist **Gaeko** (who raps in the song) and **Greg Priester**, an American YouTube personality known for his covers of Korean songs. "Midnight" is a feel-good earworm that will surely make you want to get up and dance anytime and anywhere — even in a public restroom. — *Regina Kim, Culture & Trends Writer, Netflix*

The Unbearable Sweetness of SEVENTEEN's "Rock With You"

In an industry actively exploring the potential of noise and computer music to build intensity, this affectionate pop-rock exultation is a notable exception. “Rock With You” is a creature comfort, a soothing balm, a warm embrace. Bursting with charming earnestness, it describes devotion to a romantic partner with an almost childlike awe: “I wanna rock with you, I wanna stay with you.” The feeling is so euphoric that even language fails to capture its ethereal magic. “No words are enough for you,” sings Mingyu with full-throated conviction, marveling at the way love makes us inarticulate, even speechless, in its rapture. — *Elizabeth de Luna, Culture Reporter at Mashable*

NCT 127's Halloween Love Confession, "Favorite (Vampire)"

For Halloween, NCT 127 serenaded us with "Favorite (Vampire)," an epic, vampire-themed love song exuding nostalgia for the sentimentality and romance of R&B and K-pop classics from the '90s and early 2000s. Produced by veteran songwriters Rodney "Darkchild" Jerkins and Kenzie, it lifts a haunting whistling hook over rousing pop-trap production and a luscious vocal chorus, on which the group passionately proclaim true love. The beautifully wistful chorus alone would reward any idol's decision to join SM Entertainment – it continues the company's legacy of iconic melodies and helps make "Favorite (Vampire)" one of NCT's most gorgeous songs to date. — *Vivien Wu, Music & Culture Writer*

The Boyz Make Their Mark With "Maverick"

Solidifying their spot as one of K-pop's chameleons, The Boyz are, as they confidently declare on the chorus, "back in the game, son!" with clear intent to shake things up. A fast-tracked comeback released two months after wrapping up promotions for their bright, pop single "Thrill Ride," "Maverick" comes with a dark theme and killer creativity to match. The song utilizes an eerie cinematic intro, intense rap opening, and a melodic chorus by way of their skilled vocal line. Their most successful project yet, the group combines their signature self-confidence messaging with a Battle Royale-inspired music video, along with a set and styling that rivals Hollywood productions. While The Boyz have shown the world they can do it all, they've also proven that they're just getting started. — *Lily Dabbs, Freelance Journalist*

Kai Embraces His Mystifying Versatility

If “Mmmh” embellished Kai’s solo debut with the feisty, sensual aura that characterizes him, “Peaches” grabbed that ambiance by the hand and showered it with flirtatious, sweet juices. For his second comeback as a soloist, Kai’s mystifying versatility is accompanied by the most exquisite notes of modern R&B seamlessly intertwined with traditional oriental influences and easy electro beats that perfectly match his distinctive velvety vocals. “At the very moment, we drink up each other / Our fantasies become more infinite,” Kai serenades as he compares sweet peaches to love’s most compelling moments. Influenced by Tao Yuanming’s *The Peach Blossom Spring* — a fable about people that find an empyrean dreamland where they coexist in harmony, oblivious to the outside world — and accompanied by a whimsical music video, Kai’s peachy world is just as sexy and hypnotizing as the one he presented us with for *KAI (开)*, but with an extra pinch of coquetry, and a dash of his more vulnerable side. “Peaches” is sweet. “Peaches” is dangerous. It’s an invitation to get lost in the possibility of letting love and desire take over in an otherworldly dimension. — *Carolina Malis, Entertainment & Beauty Digital Content Creator*

Yeseo Finds Emancipation on the Dance Floor With “Free Up”

Anchored by a somewhat fuller, richer soundscape than Yeseo’s jazzier, more ethereal early offerings, “Free Up” sees the musician setting her feet firmly on the dance floor. The independent Korean electronic-pop producer and songwriter’s lustrous single (off 2021’s *Try Free!* EP) is a house music/city pop/future bass hybrid featuring wobbling beats and lush, star-kissed synths that beckon listeners to shed their inhibitions and *just dance*. Yeseo declares her empowering intentions as soon as the track kicks off: “Okay, okay I’m in the zone now / Please, don’t hold your step / Ready to be yourself now.” On “Free Up,” Yeseo embraces herself for who she is, unafraid to make a bold move and purge the bad vibes — an upbeat message that listeners could certainly benefit from after another arguably gloomy year. From Yeseo’s point of view, the future looks bright. —

Erica Russell, Writer

Top 4th Gen Contenders IVE Storm K-Pop

“ELEVEN” signals the explosive debut of Starship Entertainment’s newest girl group, IVE. The song, which features a light but snappy percussive instrumental, bucks K-pop trends by slowing its pre-chorus down, ramping up anticipation before detonating its catchy chorus. The slow-mo effect is daring, shocking but effective, as evidenced by “ELEVEN” rocketing up music charts. While former IZ*ONE members Jang Wonyoung and Ahn Yujin lead the group with the beauty and charisma needed for IVE’s “luxury with bite” image, the other members of this gorgeous six-piece band show great potential with their crystal clear vocals and synchronized choreography. — *Sarah Raughley, Author of The Bones of Ruin*

Monsta X Throws It Down With “You Problem,” and It’s the Biggest Mood Of 2021

“That’s a YOU problem,” is the refrain — sung in a lethal falsetto by Monsta X main vocalist, Kihyun — on one of the biggest bops of 2021. The track, titled “You Problem,” is off the group’s freshly released English album (their second), *The Dreaming*. Yet again, it displays their trilingual dominance, as they’ve **charted** in Korean, **Japanese**, and English since 2020 alone. This particular song is rambunctious, joyous dance-pop, reminiscent of the **Scissor Sisters**. It details the push and pull of love, as they collectively urge us to stop the incessant overthinking that always gets in the way of the good stuff. If you like someone, quit making excuses, admit it, revel in it, and “get lost in the romance.” After two years of shared grief, solitude, and uncertainty, it’s high time to do exactly as Monsta X says... “let’s just dance.” — *Ambika Muttoo, Editor, Femina (India)*