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K-POP TOUR

ATEEZ DO IT ALL FOR THE FANS

'We want to write in a way that people from all parts of the world can relate to,' says Min Gi. 'So it's a personal experience for us that ends up universal'

By JAE-HA KIM

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ATEEZ' Min Gi in Phoenix, Arizona. "We put a lot of effort into writing each word," says the rapper.

KQ ENTERTAINMENT - BOOBAGRAPHY*

About half an hour after the Korean pop group ATEEZ finish an exhilarating concert at Chicago's Wintrust Arena, the eight members of the group are probably exhausted. After all, they've just spent nearly three hours executing beautifully choreographed dance moves for 23 songs drawn from their four-year career. Management apologetically requests that no photos be taken backstage, because the members may look a bit disheveled. It is true that some of their stage makeup has worn off. But all that does is accentuate their runway-worthy bone structure and flawless skin: They look even better in person than in the meticulous concept photos that accompany each album release.

ATEEZ — which includes rappers Hong Joong and Min Gi and vocalists Woo Young, Seong Hwa, Yeo Sang, San, Yun Ho, and Jong Ho — are midway through their *The Fellowship: Break the Wall* arena tour, following up the previous *The Fellowship: Beginning of the End* world tour that kicked off in January. To ensure that their fandom, ATINY, won't be paying money to see the same concert, they carefully curated a new setlist so only eight songs overlap between these two tours.

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“We have released over 100 songs, so it was a little hard to select songs for our show,” ATEEZ leader Hong Joong says. “We wanted to show a different vibe than before. So we thought about it and picked songs to show a different side to ATEEZ.”

After their October 2018 debut, ATEEZ found a following almost immediately. In March 2019, they launched *The Expedition Tour*, playing 1,000-seat clubs in the United States. As their concerts sold out, word quickly spread about the explosive, theatrical quality of their live shows. A month later, the rookies performed a series of European

concerts before heading to Australia. They were booked for an arena tour in 2020, which was ultimately postponed until this year. Their current tour features five of the seven tracks from their latest EP, *The World EP.1: Movement*. And before they head to Japan, where their tour will close, ATEEZ will release *The World Ep. Paradigm* on Nov. 30 for the Japanese market.

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“The concept for that album will be a bit sexier and smoother,” Woo Young says.



Hong Joong, captain of ATEEZ. “I studied a lot for this interview,” he says.

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It has now been three weeks since ATEEZ kicked off *The Fellowship: Break The Wall*. During that time, the group performed two nights in Seoul before heading to the United States to kick off the North

American leg of their tour. In between their shows in Arizona and Texas, the band flew to Santiago, Chile, to perform at the Music Bank K-pop festival. They had just enough time to change into their stage clothes and sprint to the stage, only to learn that the festival was being canceled midway due to inclement weather.

“We felt so bad that we couldn’t perform for our fans,” Woo Young says. “There were some fans crying. We were grateful that they waited for us and did our best to cheer them up.”

The bulk of this interview was conducted via a video call prior to their show at the Dickies Arena in Fort Worth. On that day, the members — who range in age from 22 to 24 — sat in a semi-circle backstage a few hours before they were scheduled to perform a soundcheck for VIP ticketholders. Pink-haired Woo Young sat on the far left, playfully leaning out of view at times until the princely Seong Hwa gave him a gentle nudge. As befitting his role as ATEEZ’s captain, the effervescent Hong Joong waved hi and helped steer questions toward his more shy bandmates. His co-lyricist Min Gi sat next to him, exuding a cool demeanor. Both dressed in black, quiet Yeo Sang laughed each time San playfully flexed his arms. Yun Ho took every opportunity possible to thank the band’s fandom, ATINY. And Jong Ho, the group’s *maknae* or youngest member, sat furthest on the right, listening attentively.

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We conduct this interview in Korean, with the exception of Hong Joong, whose foreign language skills have improved so much that he converses with me primarily in English. After his bandmates proudly point out how well he speaks English, Hong Joong smiles shyly and says, “I studied a lot for this interview.”

Dressed casually in black or grey shirts and various degrees of ripped jeans, the group leans forward when I ask if there’s anything on their mind that they’d like to talk about. Perhaps Jong Ho’s song “Gravity,” which is featured prominently in the new K-drama “Reborn Rich”? Or their 2019 song “Say My Name” re-entering the music charts? Or maybe Hong Joong’s film photography exhibition *From November 7, 1998*?

That’s all good and fine, but Seong Hwa has more important matters on his mind.

“It’s already Nov. 17 in Korea, so it’s ATINY’s birthday,” he says. “We would like to thank them. Because of their four years of love and

support, we are able to be where we are now.”

Woo Young adds, “We will continue to work hard to be artists that you can be proud of.”

K-pop idols and their fans have the kind of symbiotic relationship that’s easy for naysayers to mock. But at its purest level, it is sweetly innocent and a source of comfort. They look out for each other, with fans reporting *sasaengs* — obsessive fans who are more like stalkers — and artists conveying their affection and encouraging altruistic behavior.

About 20 minutes after the start of their sold-out concert at Chicago’s Wintrust Arena, Hong Joong looked out into the crowd and made a plea. He asked fans to be mindful of each other’s welfare: Don’t push each other, summon security if anyone is in distress, and stay safe. He promised that the group would move around the entire stage so that everyone would get a good view of them.

His words of caution come in the aftermath of South Korea’s Itaewon tragedy over Halloween weekend, where 156 young people died during a crowd surge in the popular Seoul neighborhood. After careful consideration, ATEEZ went ahead with their two scheduled consecutive nights at Jamsil Arena and donated ₩100 million (about \$75,000) to benefit the Hope Bridge Korea Disaster Relief Association. They also paid tribute to the victims.

Madeline Hirata was in Itaewon during the tragedy and says she contemplated not attending the show, because she was overwhelmed by what she had witnessed. But ultimately, the college senior says the kindness of the group and being surrounded by other fans helped her navigate this difficult time.

“After their first song, Hong Joong spoke in Korean, which was then quickly translated into English,” says Hirata, a student at Ewha Womans University. “He said something to the effect of, ‘We would like to recognize the lives lost in Itaewon yesterday with a moment of silence.’ The acknowledgement about Itaewon were the only words translated into English that night. I remember how deafening the silence was in the arena. Then and even now, I still have trouble processing that I was so close to the events that occurred the night before. But in that moment of silence, I truly felt the weight, grief and trauma of the situation. I felt quite emotional at how quiet the arena had become and appreciative that ATEEZ had recognized the awful event. I felt a bit selfish and guilty as someone who was in Itaewon that night, but having ATEEZ pay tribute in some way allowed me to enjoy the night, the music, and the band that I absolutely love.”



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The restorative power of ATEEZ’s music is something ATINY talk about often. Mental health experts, too, say that a collective musical experience can provide relief in the aftermath of a horrific event.

“It is an understatement that music heals,” says Joy Lieberthal Rho, a LCSW counselor at the Juilliard School. “Music moves people to tears of joy and release. The communal aspect of a concert, no matter the genre, is also incredibly powerful. To be in the company of others, giving and receiving emotions through song or melody, can give a sense to anyone that they are not alone — that they don’t have to suffer alone.”

I ask ATEEZ if they ever feel burdened by the pressure of knowing that so many of their fans analyze their lyrics.

“Hong Joong and I write most of the lyrics, so of course we feel some pressure,” Min Gi says. “But we put a lot of effort into writing each word, because it’s things we relate to as well. We want to write in a way that people from all parts of the world can relate to. So it’s a personal experience for us that ends up universal.”

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Yun Ho adds, “When we work on our music, we do think about how ATINY will feel when they hear our songs. Honestly, we’re really happy fans are listening to the meanings behind the songs. I feel thankful that our songs can help them in any way.”

By now, it is clear that some members like to talk a bit more than others. They are cognizant of the fact that they don’t each speak equally in interviews and don’t appear at all concerned about who is quoted more. Rather, their theory is that the message they convey is more relevant than who said it. More often than not, it’s Hong Joong — who during this interview politely raises his hand so he doesn’t talk over his bandmates. He takes his leadership role seriously, making sure that the conversation flows.

Still, I know ATINY would like to hear from everyone, so I ask each of them what the future holds for ATEEZ.

“We will work as hard and as much as the love we receive from our fans,” San says. “Please look forward to that.”

Yeo Sang pragmatically adds, “Thanks to the love of ATINY, we were able to do two tours in one year! We promise we will give you many more good performances.”

I look over at Jong Ho and ask him a question that has nothing to do with ATINY. Three years ago, he had hoped his travels would take him to England or Spain, where he could watch the Premier League or La Liga in person. Has he been able to do that yet?

“It’s still a dream,” he says. “I’ve seen soccer in Korea, but not overseas yet.”

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At their Chicago concert, ATEEZ had mentioned that they’ve now experienced the first snowfall of this tour. In South Korea, there is a

romantic notion that who you spend the first snowfall with is someone who will remain in your future. It feels right that for ATEEZ, this snowfall landed on a day they spent with their fans.

ATEEZ World Tour *The Fellowship: Break the Wall* setlist:

1. “New World”
2. “Answer”
3. “Sector 1”
4. “The Ring”
5. “Hala Hala”
6. “Dazzling Light”
7. “Mist”
8. “Sunrise”
9. “My Way”
10. “Illusion”
11. “Wave”
12. “Win”
13. “Horizon”
14. “Say My Name”
15. “Cyberpunk”
16. “I’m the One” (Heat-topping version)
17. “Rocky”
18. “Wonderland”
19. “Guerrilla”
20. “Turbulence”
21. “Celebrate”
22. “From”
23. “The Real”