

How ablume Overcame Legal Battles to Flourish with "Echo"

"I truly believe it was an act of courage for us."



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

MAY 09, 2025



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SIO, SAENA and ARAN of ablume. (Photo credit: Adam Franzino)

The K-pop girl group **ablume** released their sunny debut single “Echo” this morning. Like most artists, they want to leave the song’s meaning up to the listeners. We could theorize that this infectiously catchy pop song is about being infatuated with a desirable young man (“*Boy, you so special/I will never let you go*”). But with a bit of punctuation erasure — and knowledge of what the trio went through to get to where they are today — listeners could also interpret the lyrics as ablume’s de novo

declaration of gratitude to their fans for sticking with them through tumultuous times: “*Boy you so special/I will never let you go.*”

In 2022, SAENA, ARAN and SIO — along with Keena — debuted in the group FIFTY FIFTY. A year later, they had an amazing career trajectory that included the hit single, “Cupid,” as well as a song (“**Barbie Dreams**”) featured on the *Barbie* soundtrack.

But in 2023, the quartet filed an injunction to sever ties with their management company, Attrakt. This led to a public back and forth battle, where the label alleged that FIFTY FIFTY’s producer, Ahn Sung-il, tried to illegally extract the group from them to broker a better deal with a different company. (Keena later returned to Attrakt, and is now the only original member of FIFTY FIFTY.)

Attrakt had also made claims that they owned the rights to “Cupid.” But the Seoul Central District Court said yesterday (Thursday, May 8) that the song’s copyright belongs to Ahn and his production company, The Givers: “The court ruled that the copyright transfer agreement explicitly identified The Givers as the contracting party,” according to coverage by the **Korea JoongAng Times**.

“I just want to say how deeply grateful I am to the fans who believed in us and stood by us,” group leader SAENA told ***K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim***. “The decision we made wasn’t easy, but I truly believe it was an act of courage for myself, and ultimately for all of us. There were negative reactions and misleading headlines, but those stories weren’t true. The three of us had countless conversations and came to realize that we were never alone. That helped us find clarity and choose the path that felt most honest to us — returning to music.”

In this extensive interview, SAENA (21), SIO (20) and ARAN (20) spoke of finding the strength to flourish as ablume, how the litigation impacted their mental health, and their personal goals for this year and beyond.

“I ended up seeking professional counseling. And through that, I started learning how to face my emotions in a healthier way. That process helped me better understand what was going on

inside. 'Echo' was born out of that time in my life, so for me, the song feels like a record of recovery. It wasn't just about singing. I poured everything I was feeling into it." — SIO

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

ablume(어블룸) 'Echo' Official MV



ARAN, SAENA and SIO, you already have a following from your days in FIFTY FIFTY. What are some of the pros and cons from having already been in a well-known group?

ARAN: What's really kept me going is knowing there are still people who remember our voices and continue to wait for our music. That kind of support has been such a blessing. It gave me the strength to hold on and the courage to start over. Of course, that also means I feel a strong sense of responsibility. I constantly want to do well and show people the best version of us. Sometimes that pressure feels like a lot to carry, but I think going through those moments has helped me grow. It's part of what makes me stronger as an artist.

SAENA: Coming from a well-known group, I think what I appreciated most was the trust that had already been built between us and the fans. Knowing that people still recognized my voice or remembered my time on stage was a huge comfort. It made me feel like I could open up more and be honest, and through that, I was able to show

more of who I really am. At the same time, having so many eyes on me sometimes felt overwhelming. There were moments when I struggled with the pressure to always have it together, and I worried about how my choices or emotions might be seen. But I tried hard not to lose myself in that, and in doing so, I think I became more grounded and stronger.

SIO: What I'm most thankful for is that there are people who still remember me. It's not something I take lightly, because not everyone gets to begin again with that kind of support. At the same time, I know there may be people who still hold on to how I used to be, and for them, the person I am now might feel unfamiliar. Back then, that version of me was real too, but I've changed in ways that feel important. I just hope people can get to know who I am now, and connect with me again, slowly and naturally.

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I believe that ablume is derived from the German word for *blume*. Can you share what your group name means to you and why you chose it?

ARAN: To me, ablume isn't just about the moment a flower blooms. It's about everything that comes before — the planting, the watering, the time and care it takes to grow. If you watch our first music video "Echo," you'll see the three of us standing in sunlight, weathering storms together, and eventually blooming. I hope that kind of journey speaks to people, even if it takes time. We want to keep making music that reflects that process, music that carries stories of growth, resilience, and quiet hope.

SIO: The name ablume means to bloom, and for us, it's about how the three of us came from different backgrounds but ended up coming together to grow in our own way. Our debut song "Echo" felt like the perfect representation of that beginning. From the moment I heard the demo, I knew it was our story. We put a lot of care into every part, from the emotions behind it to how the parts were split. I feel like we've just started to bloom after everything we've been through, and that's why ablume isn't just a name. It captures exactly where we are right now.

SAENA: We spent a lot of time thinking about our [group] name because we wanted something that could truly reflect our story and our journey. We've faced a lot, but

through it all, we've learned, leaned on each other, and kept moving forward. In the "Echo" music video, there's a scene where a flower blooms after going through the wind and rain, and I felt that really captured the essence of who we are as a band. It wasn't just a beautiful image. It symbolized how we approach music, and where we hope to go from here. That's why the name feels so meaningful to me.



SAENA (Photo credit: Adam Franzino)

Right now, there is so much attention on Korean entertainment internationally. But this wasn't the case until the past few years. When you were growing up, did you ever imagine that K-pop would be popular in countries outside of Korea and Asia?

ARAN: When I was younger, I honestly never imagined this would happen. Just being loved within Korea already felt like something to be deeply grateful for. But at some point, K-pop started to spread all over the world, and seeing fans overseas singing along to Korean songs and supporting us made me realize how much things have changed. At the same time, I think pop music from other countries is becoming more familiar and accessible here in Korea too. It feels like a beautiful cultural exchange, and I'm truly thankful to be part of it. Knowing that we can connect with listeners

around the world gives me so much motivation.

SAENA: It's still kind of surreal. I never expected that kind of response. But when I think about it, I believe people resonated with our music because we always tried to stay grounded in the basics. From the sound to the message to the performance, we put a lot of importance on what's underneath the surface—on the heart and sincerity behind it all. We wanted to show who we really are through our music, and maybe that honest intention is what reached people. I'm so grateful to all the fans who've waited for us, and we're doing our best to come back with even better music and performances.

SIO: Even now, there are moments when it feels unbelievable. Seeing Korean songs chart globally and fans around the world singing along to our performances is something I never thought I'd experience. When "Cupid" started getting so much love from everywhere, that was the first time I truly felt it. Music really does go beyond language. Even if we don't speak the same language, music can move hearts on its own. And in that moment, I also realized that emotion can travel faster and deeper than words ever could. Even when you can't explain everything, if something is sincere, it naturally finds its way into the music. And if that can reach someone, I think that's the most powerful part of what music can do.

"Echo" reflects on finding strength even while you're facing difficult challenges.

How have you dealt with these challenges?

SIO: I think all three of us had to go through some really hard times in our own way. For me, expressing emotions wasn't easy. My heart felt tangled most of the time, and there were days when it felt like I was doing everything just to stay afloat. I ended up seeking professional counseling. And through that, I started learning how to face my emotions in a healthier way. That process helped me better understand what was going on inside. "Echo" was born out of that time in my life, so for me, the song feels like a record of recovery. It wasn't just about singing. I poured everything I was feeling into it.

SAENA: In the beginning, I didn't know how to deal with all the pain, so I just had to let myself feel everything as it came. There were a lot of nights when I cried quietly on my own. But eventually, I found myself drawn back to music again, and hearing our fans' kind words gave me the strength to keep going. That's when I realized I needed to get to know myself better, not just emotionally, but deeply because how can you protect something you don't fully understand, especially when that something is you? I

started asking myself questions every day. At first, it felt a little strange, but those quiet moments helped me reflect and reconnect with who I am. I think that's why I'm able to stand stronger now, no matter what comes my way.

ARAN: There were definitely moments when I wanted to stop trying, when I felt like I couldn't hold on to courage anymore. Looking back, I think a lot of it came from frustration and feeling misunderstood. Whenever those feelings came over me, I just started writing, almost like a journal no one would read. I would let everything out without filtering, and somehow those words turned into melodies, then chords, and before I knew it, I was making music again. The heaviness in my heart would lift along the way. You know how you naturally reach for tissues when you cry? For me, music was like that. It was the most instinctive, honest way to cope, especially when things got tough.



SIO (Photo credit: Adam Franzino)

Do you still hang out with your former bandmate Keena from FIFTY FIFTY?

ARAN: We're not in touch at the moment, but I've heard that [she and the other members] are continuing their music careers. As for us, we're focused on walking our

own path with our music and our story. We just hope people will continue to follow our journey with warmth and open hearts.

Ahn Sung-il [known professionally as SIAHN] produced "Cupid." Did he produce "Echo"?

SAENA: Yes, that's right. Producer SIAHN played a key role in shaping the overall direction and tone of our single album "Echo." We worked with a really talented team of writers and producers to bring the song to life, so we're excited for people to hear it and hope it lives up to the anticipation.

ARAN: We talk a lot as a team, not just about the music, but also the visuals, the message, and the overall concept. And throughout that process, Producer SIAHN has been a huge help in shaping ablume's identity. He always knows how to highlight the things that only we can express, and that gives us a lot of confidence.

SIO: What matters most to me is that he truly understands the emotions and messages we want to convey. That made it easy to trust him throughout the creative process. We'll be working with him on more upcoming projects too. It's not just about the music—we're constantly exchanging ideas and making sure the unique essence of ablume stays strong. We're looking forward to showing you what's next.

Will there be an EP or an album coming out this year? Or a tour?

SIO: Nothing has been officially announced yet, but we're hoping to share a bigger project with you later this year, including a follow-up track. If you pay close attention to the ending of the "Echo" music video, you might catch a hint about what's coming next. We're preparing something that shows a different side of us, with a new style and sound, so we're really excited. As for touring and performances, we've been having positive discussions, and we'd love to share good news with you very soon!

Many of your fans have said that they appreciated how transparent you were about why you left FIFTY FIFTY. Where did you find the strength to speak out about all the various issues?

ARAN: There were so many misunderstandings and false stories about us out there, and we've worked really hard to set the record straight, and we still are. What gave me the strength to speak up was knowing that we had nothing to hide. We were telling the truth, and I believed in that. Even in the most difficult and intimidating moments, that belief helped me trust myself and keep moving forward.

SIO: Looking back, it was an incredibly unfamiliar and difficult time. Choosing to take legal action was not something we decided lightly, but we knew we needed a healthier and more stable environment to keep making music long-term. There was a point where trust had been broken, and I found myself constantly questioning if I was doing the right thing. I was mentally and physically exhausted. I had to take time off to recover, including medical treatment and counseling. It took a long time before I felt that spark again—that desire to sing. But I think it was the trust between the three of us that brought me back. And now, being able to share our voices again with the fans... I'm just really thankful for that.

There are many K-pop fans, but few know what actually goes into making a good song. So what does go into making a single?

ARAN: When we work on a song, we start by having in-depth discussions about the overall concept and mood. During recording and rehearsals, we experiment with different arrangements and nuances to see what brings out the best in the track. Even the smallest shift can change the entire atmosphere of a song, so we pay close attention to the details. We also communicate a lot with our producer to make sure everything lines up with what we want to express. Through all of this, we're building the experience and confidence to eventually take on a bigger role in shaping our own music. It's something we're steadily preparing for, and we're really excited about that next step.

SAENA: The process kind of feels like painting on a blank canvas, adding colors one by one. There's the big picture — choosing a song, dividing up parts, creating choreography. But what really makes it special are all the small, detailed choices that happen along the way. When I first heard “Echo,” I instantly felt it was meant for us. We tried singing the whole thing together and then worked out which parts fit each of our voices best, experimenting with harmonies to really complete the sound. We believe that the emotional impact of a song comes from its message and feeling, so we pay a lot of attention to that. One of our dreams is to eventually perform as a band too, and we're excited to take on those kinds of new challenges with our fans by our side.

SIO: There are so many steps involved in finishing a song. One big difference now is how involved we are, not just in the music, but also in the message, choreography, and visuals. With “Echo,” for example, we had really detailed discussions about how we wanted to express certain emotions, how to divide the parts, and how to bring out the story behind each line. We also adjusted the arrangement to suit our individual vocal

ranges, and even in the choreography, there are little moments shaped by our own input. Going through that process made me realize how much we've shifted from just receiving direction to actively creating together. That change means a lot to us.

Have you traveled to the United States before?

ARAN: I went to Los Angeles while we were preparing for this album. We filmed the music video, did photo shoots, and worked on different contents, so the schedule was packed, but the city itself felt so spacious and calm. Whenever I looked up at the mountains and the sky, it gave me a moment to breathe. What stood out the most was visiting the Griffith Observatory. I've always loved the movie *La La Land*, and getting to cover "City of Stars" there felt so emotional and special. It's a memory I'll always hold close.

SAENA: This trip to L.A. was actually my first time in the U.S., and the moment I stepped off the plane, it felt surreal. Everything looked and felt so different. One of the most memorable moments was shooting with a local photographer. We changed locations on the fly, and sometimes even asked people on the street to join the shoot. At one point, we danced while taking photos, and Aran ended up posing while getting a piggyback ride from someone we met. That relaxed, spontaneous vibe really matched the energy we want to express. We laughed so much that day. It was such a joyful experience!

SIO: I also went to L.A. for the music video shoot. Since we were on a tight schedule, there wasn't much time to explore, but I think that made the little moments even more memorable. One that I keep thinking about is when we filmed in the desert. I had never been to a desert before, so standing there, surrounded by open land and sky, brought me this strange sense of calm and clarity. I can still picture it so clearly. Even in the middle of a busy shoot, we made memories that felt really personal. I hope we can return someday to perform live and share that experience with our fans.



ARAN (Photo credit: Adam Franzino)

What have you recently watched that you enjoyed?

ARAN: I recently rewatched the film *Pride and Prejudice*. I've always loved romance stories, but this one goes beyond just love. It carefully shows how misunderstandings between people slowly unravel. It reminded me how important honesty and open-mindedness are when it comes to truly connecting with someone. The subtle flow of emotions, even just the way characters look at each other, stayed with me for a long time after watching.

SAENA: I watched the documentary *Mickey: The Story of a Mouse* not too long ago. I've always loved Mickey Mouse, so I was really curious about the story behind him. I didn't expect the history to be so deep and wide-ranging — it honestly surprised me. For me, Mickey has always been a symbol of joy. What stood out to me most in the documentary was his honest, innocent reactions to everything around him. Even in serious situations, there's something uplifting and light about his presence. I found that really inspiring and thought, I want to carry that kind of positive energy too.

SIO: "Breaking Bad" deals with some heavy topics, but I watched it recently and it really left an impact on me. It made me think a lot about how a single choice can

completely change everything, and just how complex people can be. Watching Walter slowly change, and still try to justify himself all the way through, was both unsettling and oddly understandable. It wasn't just about what's right or wrong, but more about wondering why he felt like he had no other option. Even after finishing the show, it stayed with me. I find myself thinking about it randomly, even now.

Who has been your biggest influence as an artist?

ARAN: There are so many artists who've influenced me, but Adele holds a really special place in my heart. My mom used to play her songs a lot when I was little, and over time, I think her soulfulness just naturally settled into me. The first song I ever sang in front of a big crowd was Adele's "Hello," and I still remember how nervous and emotional I felt. There's something warm and reassuring in her voice. Every time I listen to her, it feels like she's quietly telling me, "It's okay, you're safe." Her music has always been a source of comfort for me.

SAENA: I find a lot of inspiration in older artists and the emotions they captured. Lately, I've been listening to Bee Gees a lot. There's something pure and honest in their sound that really resonates with me. The way music from that era expresses emotion so openly, without trying to dress it up, really reaches deep into my heart. I often catch myself humming along. In those moments, I feel quietly moved in a way that's hard to explain. I hope to create music that lingers with people in a soft but meaningful way, something that gently becomes part of their everyday moments.

SIO: When I think about who's influenced me the most as an artist, the first person that comes to mind is a close childhood friend. During some of my hardest times, she didn't need to say much. She just understood me. I still remember the day she quietly said, "I just want to hear you sing again." That one sentence meant everything. It brought me back to why I fell in love with music in the first place. These days, I'm really inspired by artists like Yebba. The way she carries emotion in her voice feels so honest and unfiltered. I hope to create music like that too. Something that makes people feel seen and comforted, even in silence.

Following up on that, whose musical career do you admire?

SIO: I don't think I could pick just one role model. Over time, that list has only grown. Some days I'm drawn to one artist's energy, and other times I'm moved by someone else's emotional depth. For example, I really admire Tori Kelly's incredible technique and warm tone, Slash's raw and emotional guitar sound, and Sunwoo Jung-A's fearless

approach to genre and creativity. They've all left a strong impression on me. Listening to their music pushes me to keep exploring and expanding my own sound. They've become guideposts as I try to find my own artistic voice.

SAENA: I try not to set just one person as my role model, because I feel like that could limit my own potential. But I've definitely been inspired by artists from earlier generations, especially those who use music to express the full spectrum of life. You can hear their joy, pain, and everything in between. There's something so honest in their work. I'd love to become an artist who can share my story that way too, with a sense of calm and authenticity.

ARAN: It's hard to choose just one role model, but I do know the kind of mindset I want to have when it comes to music. For me, the most important thing is sincerity. I believe that when a song carries raw emotion and honesty, it resonates with people in a way that polished or calculated music just can't. I hope I can continue to make music that holds onto that kind of purity and touches people's hearts.



SIO, ARAN, SAENA (Photo credit: Adam Franzino)

What are some things you would like to accomplish this year, whether professionally or in your personal life?

SIO: Musically, I hope we can plan our own live performance this year. Something like a small theater show, where we can really connect with the audience, look into their eyes, and sing directly to them. I think it would help us understand on a deeper level what it truly means to perform. Personally, I want to build a habit of taking better care of myself. When things get busy, I tend to put myself last, but I want to change that. Making time for myself every day, even in small ways, feels like the most important goal right now.

ARAN: This year, I really want to become someone my loved ones can be proud of. I want them to feel confident introducing me to the world. I know not all eyes on us are kind or supportive, and that's okay. But at the very least, I want to grow into someone they can look at and say, "She's doing great," no matter the circumstances.

SAENA: My goal is to become a member who creates even stronger synergy within the team. I want to grow as a vocalist so my voice stands out more clearly in each song, and I also hope to blend more seamlessly with the others during harmony parts. I'd love for us to put on our own stage filled with our colors and energy, and share that moment closely with our fans.