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EXCLUSIVE

TABLO ON HIS REVEALING NEW COLLABORATION WITH BTS' RM: 'IT FELT LIKE A DIARY'

The Epik High frontman talks about working with RM on “Stop the Rain,” which features highly personal lyrics from both artists: “I didn’t want him to be harmed in any way”

By JAE-HA KIM

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Tablo tells us about his new collaboration with RM, which gets into some heavy emotional topics.

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In January 2023, Tablo told Rolling Stone that “another Tablo x RM collab is in the pipeline.” Fans assumed that this collaboration between the Epik High frontman and the BTS leader would happen sooner rather than later. But two years after the rapper originally hinted about the upcoming song, the artists are ready to share their evocative single, “Stop the Rain,” which will be released at midnight Eastern time on Friday.

“I’ve been holding onto this song for two years,” Tablo tells *Rolling Stone* in an exclusive Zoom interview from Seoul. “One of the

reasons was because as I was listening to the song, I realized that both of us were talking about very personal things. It really felt like entries in a diary or some sort of confession. It only occurred to me then, which is crazy that we weren't really aware of where we were going with the song.”

Toward the end of 2023, while Tablo was still pondering what to do with the song, RM, 30, enlisted in the South Korean military, which is mandatory for all able-bodied men.

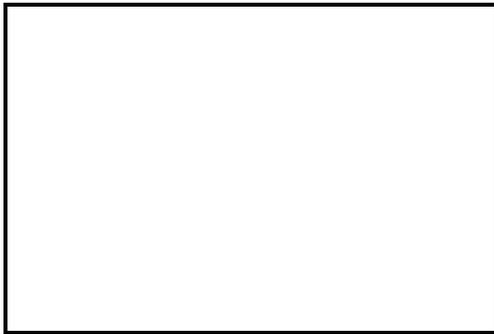
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“Once he enlisted, there was no way for me to get in touch with him for a while,” Tablo, 44, continues. “I thought maybe this song should come out when he’s around, or maybe not at all. There are many songs in my vault that I haven’t released for the same reason. So I just held on to it.” He says that he spoke with RM “a few times” after the younger artist enlisted, but never brought up the subject of the song. “And then a few months ago, he hit me up and said, ‘*Hyeong* [a

Korean term used by a younger man addressing his older brother or close male friend], where's the song we finished recording a while ago? Why don't you drop it?' I explained to him that I felt maybe his lyrics were very personal and I didn't know if he wanted it out. And he said, 'What are you talking about? Drop it!'"

Smiling, Tablo adds, "That's why I've been in a complete rush to get things together and finalize the mix. That's why this song is dropping now."

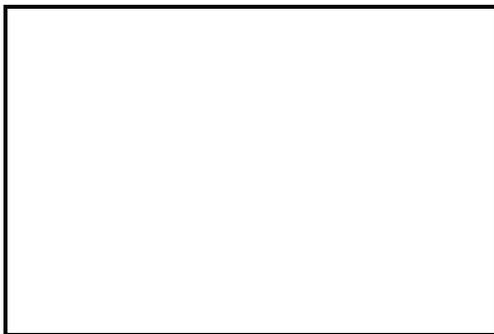
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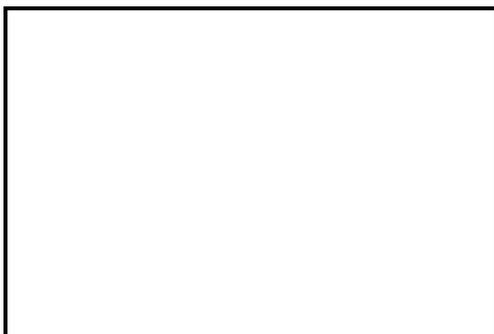
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Tablo is intentionally releasing the song a month before RM is discharged from the military, sparing RM from having to answer questions about his lyrics, which are unflinching in their depiction of despair, and their shared feeling — at different times in their lives — that they might not live long enough to grow old. Over a languid beat, RM raps, “When I was a kid/I was convinced that I was destined for the 27 club/I’m 29 sinkin’ in a bathtub.”

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The 27 club refers to a collective of prominent musicians who coincidentally died at the age of 27, including Amy Winehouse, Jimi

Hendrix, the Rolling Stones' Brian Jones, Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, and the K-pop star Jonghyun of Shinee.

Having lived through TaJinYo — a yearslong smear campaign orchestrated by hundreds of thousands of anti-fans who hated him — Tablo didn't want RM to be targeted by spiteful people intent on sensationalizing his lyrics. The personal topics they address on “Stop the Rain” include mental and physical abuse, as well as suicidal ideation. The song is in English, except for one line in Korean near the end: “다시 덧 뒤에 덧,” which alludes to a cycle of feeling trapped.

“If it was just my song with only me on it, I would have been OK with releasing this song right away,” Tablo says. “But with RM on it, it's a different story. I worried about how it could impact him. I didn't want him to be harmed in any way.”

Tablo's less concerned with how listeners may react to his own lyrics, which reveal the abuse he says he lived through as a child: “Raised by shame/Raised by the rod/Bloody calves sacrificed in the name of God/They claimed it was love/Felt like heartbreak to me.”

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Before his family immigrated to Canada, Tablo went to school in South Korea during a time when teachers had impunity to smack their students. (Corporal punishment in schools wasn't banned until 2010.) “My sister was talking about this in front of my daughter, and Haru asked if I had been hit,” he recalls. “My sister said, ‘Oh, your dad got slapped all the time.’ So we had this conversation, which was interesting, because this song kind of touches upon it. But I wasn't just hit by one person. I was hit by my dad. I was hit by my mom. I was hit by my brother. I was hit by my teachers. And when you came home and told your parents that your teacher beat you, you would get hit again for getting beat in school. I was like a ping-pong ball.”

As a parent, Tablo says he has worked hard to break this cycle. Hitting a child isn't something he ever did. But he sometimes finds himself speaking to his daughter in a way that is reminiscent of “past generations flowing through me.”

“I grew up in a certain way, and sometimes say the exact same things I hated [hearing when I was a child],” he says. “But my daughter is very open with me and tells me exactly what she feels” — which gives him the opportunity “to apologize and stop.”

He says the core memories from his own childhood made it into “Stop the Rain,” with rain offering hope, renewal, and cleansing that can alleviate some of the despair.

“Even as a child when people asked me what I liked the most, I would always say rainy days,” he says. “They would assume that it was about the rain. But it’s not. Rain allows me to realize how lucky I am to have a roof over my head. How lucky I am to be able to be holding an umbrella with or for someone. It makes me hyper aware of how rare and amazing sunny days are, and to see a rainbow is just a bonus. I like writing about rain, not because it sounds moody and cool, but because for me it has always symbolized this duality.”

So it’s not surprising that rain is a recurring theme in Tablo’s work with Epik High (“Rhapsody of Rain,” “Rain Song,” “Umbrella,” “Rain Again Tomorrow”). Or that he’s drawn to RM’s solo song “Forever Rain,” where the K-pop idol contemplates how a heavy rainfall offers him a bit of anonymity from peering eyes.

RM has often praised Tablo’s artistry and spoken of how much Epik High has impacted his own growth as a musician. But Tablo is just as quick to stress the importance of RM and BTS, not only for the group’s music, but for the way they’ve broken cultural and musical barriers. It’s because of this mutual respect that their collaborations go beyond merely guesting on a track. Each is involved in writing

what they will sing, and offering ideas on how to make the song stronger. This is how they worked on “All Day,” a cut from RM’s 2022 solo album *Indigo*. And with “Stop the Rain,” Tablo agreed with RM’s suggestion that the song would flow better in English, rather than Korean as originally planned.

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“The way he treated both these collabs made me feel kind of honored that he was putting so much effort into it,” Tablo says. “He cared enough to make it a great song. There was another bridge that made the song longer. He said, ‘What do you think about taking it out?’ And until he said that, I was content with how it was. But he was right. An example that I wanted to tell you about is that there’s a line in the song that at first was something like, ‘I can never stop the rain.’ And then RM said, ‘I think we should change that line. What do you think about, ‘I’m tryna stop the rain.’ And I was like, ‘Yo, that’s way better!’”

He adds: “I thought about how when I was younger working with other artists on their songs, if I didn’t think something was really the best choice, I would just let it fly and remain quiet. I thought that was what you’re supposed to do. But in retrospect, maybe I should’ve said something, too, and given them the opportunity to rethink an idea. That’s a true collaboration. I will always be grateful to RM for caring enough to go out on a limb like he always does.”

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