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BEING STRAY KIDS TAKES A LOT OF WORK — AND CLOSE FRIENDSHIPS

As they tour U.S. stadiums this summer, the eight-member K-pop superstars talk about what goes into their intense live concerts, their inventive music, and more

By **JAE-HA KIM**

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Stray Kids check in from their dominATE World Tour, which is playing North American stadiums this summer

JYP ENTERTAINMENT*

“Do you want us to be warm and caring, or do you want us to be toxic?” That is the question that Bang Chan, the leader of the eight-man group Stray Kids, asks with a straight face, as his bandmates crack up at his cheekiness. (More on that question later.)

Three hours before Stray Kids took the stage at San Francisco’s Oracle Park on May 28, the Korean superstars sat down for an exclusive interview with *Rolling Stone* over Zoom. They could’ve talked about all their accomplishments, which include being the first act to debut at Number One with their first six charting albums on the *Billboard* 200 (their latest, *Hop*, came out last winter). Or how their 2024 release *Ate*

sold more physical CDs in the U.S. than any album except for Taylor Swift's *The Tortured Poets Department*, according to Luminate. Then, too, SKZ — as they are also known — have the distinction of being the first male K-pop group to perform a sold-out concert at the 42,300-capacity Oracle Park, as part of their ongoing dominATE World Tour.

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But, no. Give these young men a compliment and they will downplay their remarkable achievements. When I mention that they're breaking records right and left, Bang Chan shyly says, "Not really." Laughing, he adds, "But go ahead!"

For this chat, the band is seated in two rows of four, with Felix, Bang Chan, I.N, and Seungmin in the front, and Lee Know, HAN, Changbin, and Hyunjin behind them. They are all dressed casually in black and grey ensembles, except for Felix, who sports a light-blue hoodie.

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Bang Chan and Felix, who grew up in Australia, conduct this interview in English, while the other members speak in Korean. They are professional, politely introducing themselves so that the transcriber can later distinguish their voices. But these eight friends also share a warm, unbreakable bond that comes through even over a video interview. The members in the front take turns twisting their bodies so that their bandmates in the back can be better seen.

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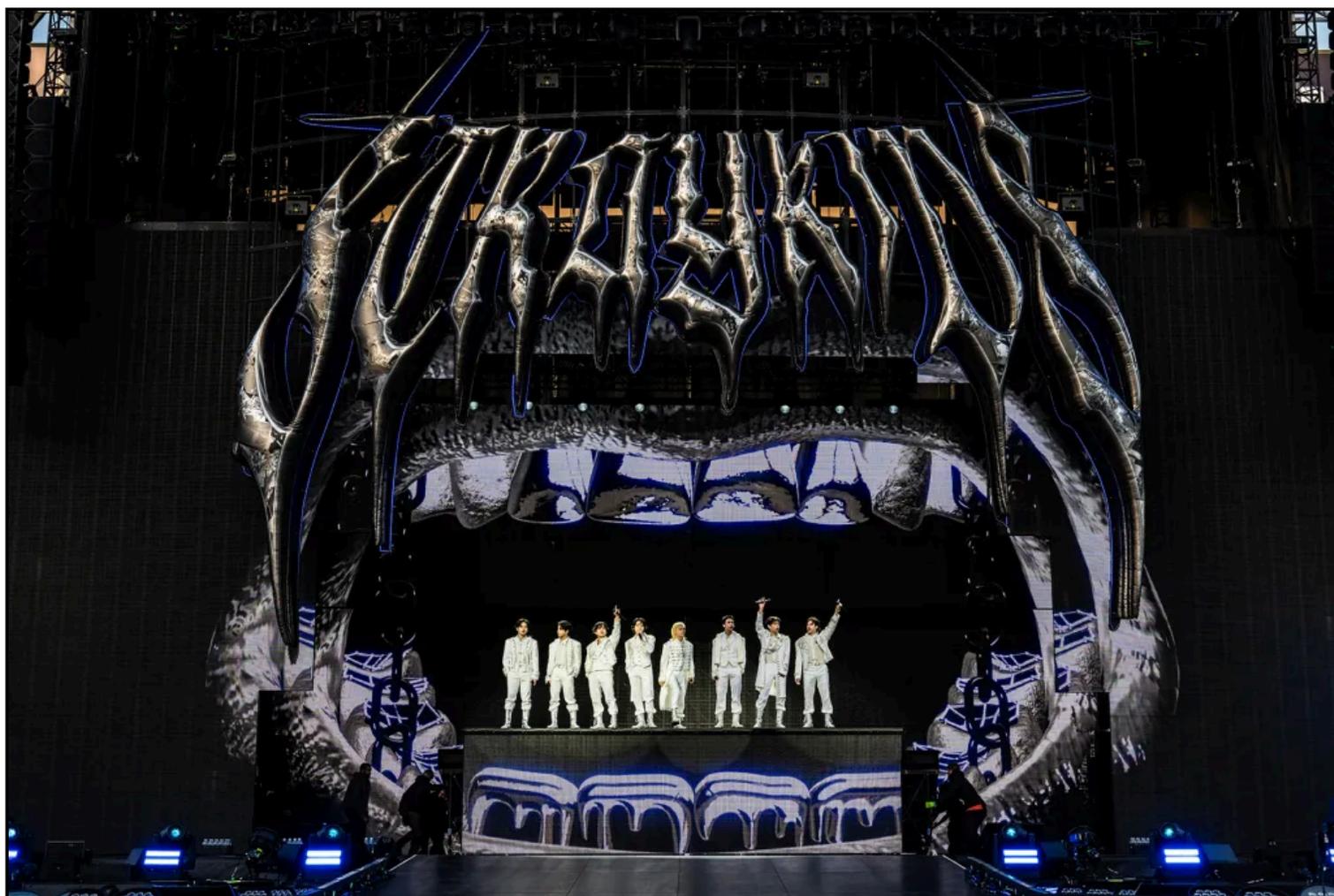


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Now seven years into their career, Stray Kids have reached the upper echelon of the pop music world, selling out stadiums worldwide. But playing to massive crowds hasn't changed how they perform for their audience. They are one of the most physical K-pop groups in concert. Stray Kids have always fiercely attacked whatever stage they play on, and have never needed to be told to show more energy – something even the Beatles heard during their baby-band days playing in Hamburg clubs.

“Of course we recognize the difference in the crowds we’re playing to now, but our mindset of how we approach the concert has not changed from our debut,” Seungmin says. “We’re grateful that we are still doing shows and people come to see us, and we’re proud to have come this far.”

Felix adds, “We can see the crowd, no matter how big or small, from the stage. We see the diversity of our fans.”



Stray Kids at Oracle Park in San Francisco on May 28.

CHRIS TUIITE/JYP ENTERTAINMENT*

Sometimes, that crowd includes family members like Bang Chan’s younger sister, the indie artist Hannah Bahng. To the delight of the packed audience at Inglewood’s SoFi Stadium earlier this week, Hannah

and a friend, singer-songwriter D4VD, were shown dancing to her brother's music on the huge video display monitor. In a déjà vu moment from previous concerts where the siblings interacted, Bang Chan shouted to his sister, "What are you doing, Hannah?!" which the crowd ate up. At this point, Bang Chan's exclamation has become a meme that fans anticipate whenever Hannah is in attendance at a Stray Kids show.

All ribbing aside, the brother and sister get along famously. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* earlier this year, Hannah said, "I've always supported my brother with his career, and I'm so proud of everything he's accomplished. So it means the world that he's so encouraging of the path I've chosen."

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Stray Kids are well known for the meticulous, hands-on approach they take to shaping their versatile sound. Bang Chan, Changbin, and HAN make up the in-house production team, 3RACHA, and write and produce most of the band's songs, tailoring them to each member's strength. Their songs veer from bass-heavy pop, to hip-hop swagger, to wistful ballads that can break your heart in just one verse.

“I feel our music has its own genre,” Bang Chan says. “I don’t know if it suits a certain chart or anything. It’s music we make to fit our own standards. We’re just doing what we enjoy and what we think is fun to do. But we feel that our music is actually defined by the listeners. So I don’t think we have the right to really say what our music is. [Our fandom] STAY does.”

Bang Chan adds that despite being successful early in their career, Stray Kids don’t consider themselves at the top of their game yet. “We still need to rise nine more steps to get to 10,” he says. “But that’s the thing. Each and every one of our members, we all share the same goal.... The fact that we are running towards something all together, that itself is like a goal that should be a standard.”

Without missing a beat, Changbin says in Korean, “I want to go to the Grammys,” which draws hoots and hollers. HAN stands up and pretends to chastise him, because Changbin’s statement can be interpreted as saying he’d like to *win* a Grammy. Thinking it over, Bang Chan smiles and simply says, “That’s a really big goal.”

It's at this point that I ask them to share something about each other. And Bang Chan responds with the aforementioned question: "Do you want us to be warm and caring, or do you want us to be toxic?"

Felix says, "I will start off nicely," and proceeds to describe Bang Chan.



"We're grateful that we are still doing shows and people come to see us, and we're proud to have come this far," Seungmin says.

CHRIS TUIITE

As Bang Chan covers his ears, pretend-shaking, Felix continues, "I really appreciate not only [him] taking care of all of us, but that he does this even at times when we have so much work to do. He always tries to be very positive. Even when one person feels a little bit exhausted, even

though he's tired himself, he takes care of it. That is a huge thing that not many people can do. He's a very down-to-earth person.”

As Felix offers this complimentary affirmation, HAN jokingly gives a thumbs down, much to Changbin's delight. When Bang Chan turns around to see why they're cracking up, HAN grins and switches to an apologetic thumbs up.

Unafraid of how his bandmates might describe him, I.N requests, “Do me [next]!”

“I.N's my roommate, and he's the youngest in the team,” Bang Chan says. “But sometimes he feels like the oldest. In many ways, he is the most responsible and he takes care of his big brothers.”

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I.N flexes his arms in appreciation and smiles, knowing that *of course* Bang Chan would compliment him. Next, I.N talks about Seungmin: “Personally, I think he has a voice that has a romantic charm. When you

hear his voice, you understand what I mean. He takes great care of the members and I really respect him.”

While Hyunjin and HAN discreetly whisper, Seungmin looks over at Hyunjin and says, “Hyunjin is very passionate and responsible with his work, and I learn a lot from him. Even though we are the same age, I depend on him a lot.”

When it’s Hyunjin’s turn to say something about Changbin, the latter cutely flashes peace signs with both hands, to encourage a positive assessment. It works.

“I’ll only say nice things,” Hyunjin promises. “Changbin is the center of gravity, the core of Stray Kids. He has someone older and younger on the team, and he acts as a mediator in many ways. He’s kind and does his work really well. And he always monitors the rest of us to make sure we’re OK.”

Looking over at HAN, Changbin says, “He’s my junior and my friend. He’s like the jokester and he brightens the mood of the team. He has so much charm.”

Smiling his thanks to Changbin, HAN begins to describe Lee Know. “He is very handsome. And even though he may not look like it, he’s very sensitive and meticulous. And he listens to me and only me.” Ignoring Lee Know’s burst of laughter, HAN continues, “I can get lonely being away from home, and he takes very good care of me. After a concert, we

spend quality time together. We all do, actually, and we share delicious food together.”

Of Felix, Lee Know says, “Everyone knows that Felix has a kind heart. He’s also the masseur of Stray Kids. Whenever we’re in pain, he comes running to massage us.”

All the members take this opportunity to cheer for Felix. (The group’s management, JYP Entertainment, recently released a statement saying that because Felix didn’t want to skip this tour, he may be modifying some of his strenuous dance moves to prevent back strain.)

“We’re always performing, and it takes a lot of energy,” Felix says. “It takes a lot of effort to maintain our health and condition. Everyone here all works out, and we take care of our bodies with what we eat and how we work out.... We have to be strong because our concerts are physically demanding. We don’t want to disappoint.”

Their intense live shows are three-hour marathons of music, dancing, and laughter. “There are a lot of people who are counting on us,” Bang Chan says. “We’re running around, we’re jumping up and down, it’s sometimes slippery so we can fall. We can always get hurt. Everyone has their own pace, but, yeah, for sure it’s not easy. But luckily we are still very healthy.”

The cerebral and emotional aspect of being a Stray Kid means the members are also constantly pushing themselves to better their craft. Working with other artists is one way they expand their sound, but the group is picky about who they invite into their fold. In 2024, they recorded a pair of standout tracks that featured pop singer Charlie Puth and Epik High rapper Tablo on “Lose My Breath” and “U,” respectively.

When they reached out to Tablo to collaborate with them, the hip-hop star said it was a no-brainer for him.

“My only rule when choosing who to work with — they must genuinely love what they do and the people they do it for,” Tablo tells *Rolling Stone* via email. “As much as this sounds obvious, it is actually rare, increasingly so in a music industry that has become more data science than art. I loved working with Stray Kids because they were so tangibly genuine, in their attitude towards music — we went through multiple other songs before landing on ‘U’ — in their on-stage presence, and in their personal interactions with me.”

In Korean, there’s a word called *jeong* (정) that has no English equivalent. It’s a feeling of closeness that stems not necessarily from proximity, but from shared values and an emotional bond. It’s a feeling that’s experienced by a mother and her child. But this tender connection can also manifest when two random Koreans run into each

other in a foreign country. Or, in the case of Stray Kids and their STAY, when eight Korean artists share three hours with a multitude of devoted fans in a packed stadium.



“We can see the crowd, no matter how big or small, from the stage,” Felix says. “We see the diversity of our fans.”

CHRIS TUITE/JYP ENTERTAINMENT*

As this interview winds down, we talk about what they like to do in their free time. And the conversation circles back to their music. “We’ve always been busy working together on new things, even before our debut,” Bang Chan says. “Yesterday, we worked on a project at the hotel room as well. Because we’ve been together for so long, we understand each other. We understand what Stray Kids music is supposed to be.”

Lee Know adds, “We talk to each other all the time and discuss our music, especially before a comeback...”

“...So it’s not just 3RACHA making a song and that’s what gets put out,” Bang Chan continues. “It’s more of a democracy. People vote on it and actually grade it and give their feedback. We’re a group, so that’s how we work. Together.”

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June 7 – Arlington, TX @ Globe Life Field

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