

# "The Rose: Come Back to Me"

A review of the Korean rock band's engaging documentary



K-CULTURE WITH JAE-HA KIM

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There's a lot to be said about The Rose, and I've said a lot about them already in outlets like *Rolling Stone*, the *Chicago Tribune* and right here on *K-Culture with Jae-Ha Kim*.



About half a year after The Rose made their 2017 debut, the quartet made their U.S. concert debut at my alma mater, performing for about 300 students at Northwestern University's Korean American Students Conference. One of the draws for the organization was that lead singer Kim Woosung is Korean American. (Remember his citizenship, because this will come into play later.)

The documentary “The Rose: Come Back to Me” depicts exactly how far they have come since their busking beginnings in Seoul. The film begins with the indie rock ‘n roll band’s blistering Coachella debut last year, which had been preceded by their 2023 Lollapalooza performance. The latter serendipitously fell on August 3 — the anniversary of the date that they launched their career with the exquisite single “Sorry.”

The song quickly became a critical favorite, with Billboard proclaiming it as one of the best songs of the year and The Rose as one of the Top 5 breakout artists from South Korea.

In my notes from 2017, I had jotted down: “‘Sorry’ is one of the best songs I’ve ever heard. Musical dexterity, dueling vocals harmonizing, chorus that will break your

heart. Simple lyrics that reach the soul. Group is one of the best from any country.”

All these years later, I still stand by my initial thoughts.

### The Rose 'Sorry' MV



It wasn't lost on the musicians that their then-management agency, J & Star Company, hadn't even wanted to release the group's self-penned "Sorry." Describing it as too slow and sad, they had suggested that The Rose release a song written by experienced K-pop songwriters who knew how to make hits.

But that's not who The Rose are. They write their own songs, which are meaningful because they touch on the reality of their lives — the good, the bad, and everything in between.

In South Korea's pop music circuit, it's difficult to get a huge following if you're out of the K-pop system. (This doesn't mean there aren't a lot of great Korean musicians in various genres — rock, pop, trot, etc.) Still, singer/guitarist Woosung (Sammy), keyboardist/singer Dojoon (Leo), drummer Hajoong (Dylan), and bassist/visual Jaehyeong (Jeff) — who recently changed his given name to Taegyeom — knew that while they didn't mind dressing up to *look* like K-pop idols, they had a different direction in mind with their music.

This is clear in each of the band members' on-camera interviews. All four dabbled as trainees in the K-pop system, but it wasn't something that any of them wanted to pursue.

And when it was suggested that Woosung should ditch the group for a solo career, he knew they needed to make a change. In 2020, The Rose filed a lawsuit to terminate the contract. Their management countersued.



Woosung's mother made this comment about him in the documentary, in a joking and loving way. But Woosung has said that when he moved to Seoul, he was under a lot of pressure to lose weight and look more like an *idol*.

Just as things seemed to be looking up for the group, the world went on lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Rose were scheduled to open for Halsey in Seoul. Canceled. An upcoming tour. Canceled.

With little left to do, the three Korean nationals in the group enlisted for their mandatory military duty, which is required of all able-bodied Korean men. Korean

American Woosung was exempt due to his nationality, and spent his time working on solo material and pursuing the law suit against their previous management company. (In 2021, The Rose reached an agreement with J & Star Company and extracted themselves from their contract.)

*The Rose: Come Back to Me* doesn't try to manipulate viewers into presenting a sanitized version of this group. It goes in-depth into how they dealt with depression. And Woosung talks about how guilty he felt for inadvertently *almost* tanking The Rose's career, when Korean news outlets reported that he had smoked pot (which he admitted to) before joining The Rose.

To U.S. readers, it may sound ridiculous that a musician smoking pot could be regarded as a big deal. I think it's just assumed that most do. But marijuana is an illegal substance in South Korea. Even South Korean citizens caught doing drugs *outside* of South Korea can be punished.

But remember, Woosung is a U.S. national. And as a first-time offender, he wasn't arrested or charged. But the tidbit was still presented as legitimate news.

[Older readers may remember back in 1980 when Paul McCartney was arrested for possession of pot in Japan. He spent 10 days in jail for his "crime." While I have never smoked pot and can't stand the smell of it, I don't view it as a jailable offense *unless* it causes damage to someone other than the smoker. That said, I also do believe that it's a good idea to know a country's laws before heading there. What's *normal* back home isn't always the case in other places.]

# The ROSE

20sec -INTRO

ECLIPSE, 2

~~? SHIFT ?~~

LIFELINE (REBORN) 13:22

RED 16:30

BACK TO ME 2x

30 --(MENT)--

DEFINITION OF UGLY IS - STRINGS 26:30

ALIVE 30:00

? CURE 33:48

-- MENT --

SOUR 37:25

COSMO 41:10

10sec(

WONDER

- MARCHING BAND

-----  
END -----

44:00

45:38

The best documentaries will give you a peek into the subject's life and present something new. But it will also take what's already known and add a unique element.

As I watched this film, I thought about documentaries that I had reviewed years ago — Neil Young’s *The Year of the Horse*, Madonna’s *Truth or Dare*, and Chet Baker’s *Let’s Get Lost*. Even the mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap* delves into the absurdity of life on the road, but in a way that rings true.

While I already knew everything about The Rose that was in this film, watching it didn’t feel redundant. It felt like sitting with old friends, hearing about what they’ve been up to, and cheering them on for the next phase of their career.

**Release date:** The 85-minute documentary made its world premiere on June 6, 2025 at the Tribeca Film Festival. (I watched an advance screener tape for this review.)

**Rating:** ★★★ (out of ★★★★★)



**Mea culpa:** Apologies for this late review. I had meant to release it timed to the film’s premiere date. However, I was commissioned to write a fun, but lengthy project for *Rolling Stone* that consumed most of my time this summer.

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