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EXCLUSIVE

MONSTA X CELEBRATE 10 YEARS TOGETHER — AND IT'S JUST THE BEGINNING

The K-pop group talk about their new EP, *The X*, and their future plans

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For a group that's known as being “beast idols” (more on that later), Monsta X have a tender quality that comes across even in a bland hotel conference room that's too small to contain their energy. Though they are in the hot seat answering questions about their decade together and the non-stop work ethic that got them here, they are thoughtful, funny, and impeccably polite.

Earlier this morning, the K-pop group released their latest EP, *The X*, which is a clever play on their group name *and* the Roman numeral for 10, which is the number of years they've been together. They also made the intentional choice to showcase six new tracks that represent their six-person lineup. After a deliberation process where

each artist got his say on which songs to include, they worked on the songs together, as they've always done.

“Majority rules,” vocalist Kihyun tells *Rolling Stone* in an exclusive interview over Zoom. “We each explain our reasons for why we want to include a song, but if we continue to disagree, then we’ll vote.”

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Smiling, group leader Shownu adds, “Sometimes we’ll share little drinks to make it fun.”

Sitting in a reverse V shape at the Mondrian Hotel in Los Angeles, Kihyun and rapper Joooney are seated up front. Shownu sits in the back, flanked by fellow vocalists Minhyuk and Hyungwon. (The youngest member, I.M — a bilingual rapper — stayed behind in Seoul to recuperate from a back injury, and answered questions via email.) Dressed in neutral colors, Kihyun, Minhyuk, and Hyungwon wear their hair in the favored middle part. Shownu and Joooney, the lone blond in the group, have bangs that lay just so over their

eyebrows. Though they may look effortlessly youthful, the members are quick to point out they're not in their twenties anymore (except for I.M, who is 29).

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“We are in our thirties now, so we’re all very interested in taking care of our health,” Shownu says. “It’s so important to focus on our wellbeing.” The unspoken portion of his thought process is that they have to remain strong so that their beloved fandom, Monbebe, won’t worry about them.

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Unlike previous conversations where they spoke predominantly in Korean, this interview is conducted in Korean, English, and Konglish — a portmanteau of the two languages with a liberal use of loanwords. Shownu, who can be shy in interviews, seems less concerned about getting his quotes included than in ensuring that his bandmates are featured. Actually, all of them are quick to prop each other up. When we discuss which songs on *The X* marks the spot for them, they don't dwell on the songs they individually wrote

or produced. Instead, they rattle off what they love about each other's songs.

The X is a love letter to Monbebe, but also a reminder of the group's continual growth as artists. "Choosing the final six tracks wasn't easy at all," I.M says. "After lots of listening sessions and discussions with the members, we finally decided on the lineup. Each song has its own unique vibe, [and] we've shaped them in a way that really feels like us."

They're eager to talk about their new songs, so we start with their pre-release single "Do What I Want," an explosive banger driven by a throbbing bass line. "That song has a very unique hook," Shownu says. "And Honey [a.k.a. Joooney] made it into our own style. He added Monsta X's color."

"N the Front" is a chaotic but melodic rap song with strong percussion that feels like it could appeal to a multitude of generations. "I thought that, too," Joooney says. "Each part of the song is full of energy. We think everyone can enjoy this song."

Minhyuk says that the funky "Catch Me Now" is his personal favorite. "All the tracks on the album are really good," he notes. "But this song in particular was made to perform onstage in the future. We hope you have a chance to see it."

“Tuscan Leather” offers the singalong hook, “We’re 1 for the M, 2 for the X,” which Joooney says is an homage to decades gone past. “I wanted to incorporate elements from Nineties hip-hop. And that line is something that fans can sing along to. It’s especially good for global fans, because it’s a line they can easily remember.”

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In a case of art imitating life, *KPop Demon Hunters* filmmaker Maggie Kang has said that Monsta X was one of the inspirations for the Saja Boys, her film’s fictional boy band. The animated hit utilized physical elements from several real-life boy groups to create its own supergroup. But when I mention to them that the Saja Boys’ “Your Idol” seems to share the same musical dynamics that are highlighted in Monsta X’s work, they nod their heads and smile at the compliment. “Savior,” for instance, is a sexy, catchy earworm that’s featured on *The X*. Monsta X worked on the song prior to the movie’s release, but “Savior” and “Your Idol” sound like they could be

companion pieces. When Monsta X sings, “My last confession, you’re my obsession,” listeners can almost visualize MX garbed in black Grim Reaper outfits trying to steal our souls, just as they did in arguably the best dance cover of “Your Idol.”

“That song is really our youngest member I.M’s track,” Kihyun says, noting that I.M and Joooney co-wrote the lyrics, and I.M did the composition and arrangement. “There were actually a lot of different versions before we chose the one on [*The X*]. It really shows the deeper color of Monsta X’s style. It’s a track on the album that was also the hardest to sing vocally.”

Though he raps on “Savior,” I.M wrote it with the vocal line in mind. He credits his bandmates for how well the song turned out. “We had a clear vision for each song,” he says. “I feel ‘Savior’ fits our vocal members perfectly.”

That vision is one reason why the group has excelled for so long in a highly competitive field that doesn’t always encourage longevity. At this point in their career, the men are less concerned with commercial success than in creating a legacy for themselves that they can be proud of.

“If we look at Monsta X’s early years, the group distinguished itself from many of its contemporaries by projecting a more mature and masculine image, inheriting the ‘beast idol’ mantle once held by 2PM,” says K-pop scholar Hye Jin Lee, who teaches a class on Korean pop culture at the University of Southern California. “They debuted as Starship Entertainment’s first hip-hop idol group, and they lived up to that positioning with members like Joooney taking on an active role in songwriting and production from the very beginning. Their combination of strong, athletic physiques, along with intense, hard-hitting music, and dynamic, high-energy performances set them apart within the K-pop landscape. I think that the group’s main rappers, Joooney and I.M, also being strong vocalists is their strength...and the group was able to branch into a more pop-oriented style of music, [which] requires more vocal skills.”

Monsta X have been unfettered by a need to fit into any one genre. Ballads incorporate rap, and many of their rap tracks include the sweetest melodies. They are also one of the few K-pop artists to release some of their albums entirely in English. Eleven years after BoA released her self-titled all-English album, Monsta X dropped *All About Luv* in 2020. This was a daring feat for a Korean group that didn’t include a native English-speaking member. Even I.M, who had spent part of his childhood in Boston, has said it was difficult to retain his foreign language skills when he had no one to practice with in Korea.

We get around to discussing the final track on *The X*. Co-written, co-composed, and co-arranged by Hyungwon, “Fire & Ice” has an old school R&B vibe that would’ve fit into the New Jack Swing scene of the late 1980s and early 1990s. “It’s a song about different people and how they love each other,” Hyungwon says. “It’s particularly special to me because it’s about how they come together.”

Of course, the members — who were born between 1992 and 1996 — were too young to remember those days, but we talk about how New Jack Swing’s mashup of rapping and singing is something Monsta X deftly incorporates into their music, making their songs attractive to older fans who predate Millennials and Gen Z.

One of Monsta X’s most well-known supporters is actress Kim Young-ok (*Squid Game*), who went viral after attending their concert in Seoul this summer. Kim, 87, is so beloved in South Korea that she’s known by the honorific title of the Nation’s Grandmother. Dressed up for the show, she danced, sang along, and teared up watching the group perform. In a video she posted on her personal YouTube channel, she tells Joooney, her friend since 2016, “I really liked your comment, ‘I’m not someone who runs for the top, I just keep going.’”

When Jantine Annika Heij was asked to collaborate on “Fire & Ice,” the songwriter knew how important *The X* was for Monsta X. She has worked with them since 2020, co-writing 10 songs both with the group as well as individual members for their solo projects. “This one was different, though, since this mini-album is a comeback,” Heij says. “It had to be big, more epic, more of that guess-who’s-back feeling. ... What makes MX stand out is the involvement of the individual members in the songwriting, composition, and arrangement process. The boys are ultra aware of what they want, and what sound they’re looking for. It’s always a delight working with artists who have such a clear vision. I feel like they set the trend [rather than] following it.”

As the interview draws to a close, the members take the opportunity to compliment each other one last time.

Of Minhyuk, Kihyun says, “He is getting so much better at English at this point and continues to become an even better vocalist than he already is.”

Looking over at Shownu, Minhyuk says, “He always thinks about his health.” As Shownu nods, Minhyuk adds, “He’s also very handsome.”

Smiling, Shownu says, “Hyungwon is also handsome and cares deeply for all of our members, even those of us who are older than him. He says sweet things to Monbebe. And he buys drinks for us often!”

“Joooney is my younger brother, but I learn from his passion and energy,” Hyungwon says. “He’s always thinking. He is awesome.”

When it’s Joooney’s turn, he says he’ll speak about both Kihyun and I.M. “All of us work really hard, but Kihyun in particular,” he says. “Monsta X wouldn’t be the same without him. He always has to hit the high parts of our songs, so he works extra hard. And I.M adds so much to our music. He’s very friendly *and* is a great friend to us. We miss him now and wish he wasn’t in pain.”

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Joooney’s message to I.M is especially poignant, because the group’s *maknae* (or youngest) is the final member of the group who

will enlist for military duty, most likely in the upcoming months.

From Seoul, I.M relays a message meant for his bandmates and Monbebe. “Don’t worry,” he says. “I’ll be back soon!”

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