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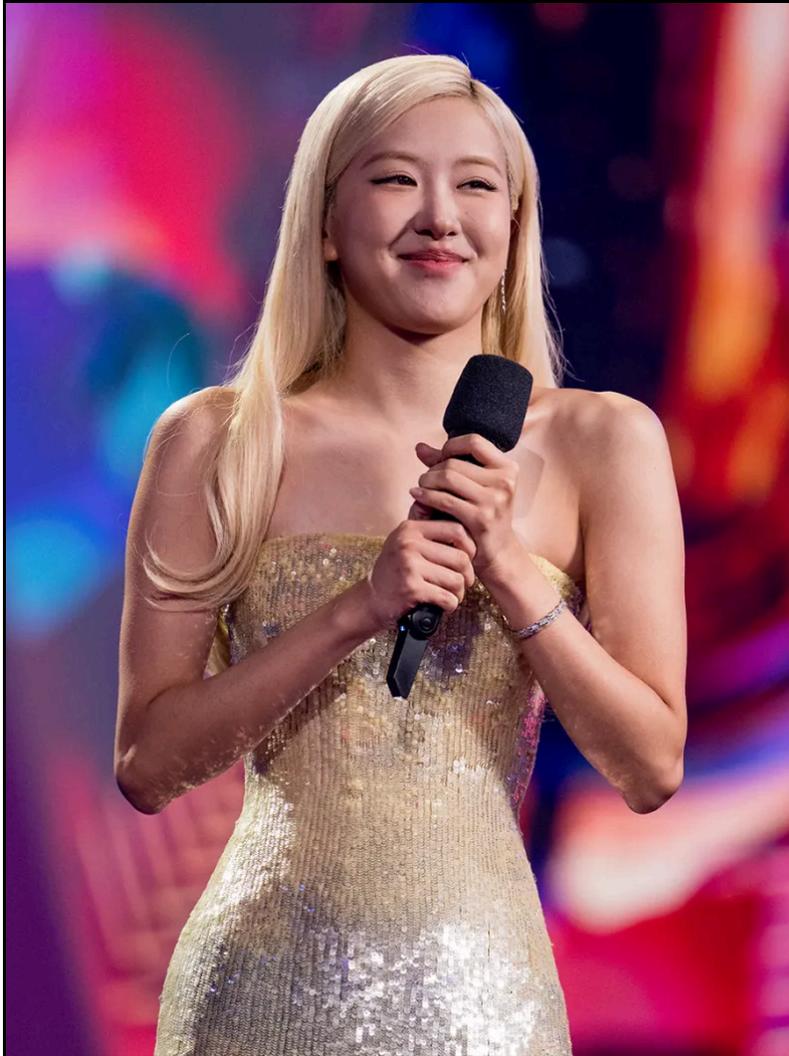
K-POP EXPLOSION

# 10 MOMENTS THAT DEFINED K-POP'S HUGE YEAR

*Kpop Demon Hunters* ruled the world, Blackpink kept getting bigger, and new artists broke rules

By **JAE-HA KIM**

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**Rosé accepting the Song of the Year Award for “APT.” at the 2025 MTV Video Music Awards; HUNTR/X from ‘Kpop Demon Hunters’**

JOHN SHEARER/GETTY IMAGES; NETFLIX

2025 has been a phenomenal year for Korean music, with idols challenging their artistic boundaries, transcending genres, crossing over into films and K-dramas, and making bold personal decisions. Kpop Demon Hunters introduced K-pop to millions of film viewers, many of whom went down rabbit holes of music discovery and became passionate fans of Korean music. Female artists like Hwasa, Blackpink, and TWICE had career-defining years. As for the men? Stray Kids broke

records and Bain inspired fans with his courage. Here's a rundown of the moments that defined K-pop's history-making 2025.

## ***Kpop Demon Hunters*, the biggest pop success story of the year**

The animated film *Kpop Demon Hunters* – Netflix's most-watched film ever — is a Korean American success story, helmed by director Maggie Kang and boasting a cast of predominantly American voice actors of Korean ethnicity (including Arden Cho and Daniel Dae Kim). The soundtrack for *KPop Demon Hunters* is Spotify's second-most-streamed album of 2025, and it earned five Grammy Award nominations, including Song of the Year and Best Pop Duo/Group performance, for the single "Golden." The phenomenal success of the film made its imprint on pop culture. Children dressed up as HUNTR/X's Rumi, Mira, and Zoey for Halloween. The singing vocalists for HUNTR/X — former K-pop trainee EJae, Audrey Nuna, and Rei Ami – sang at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. And a military band performed "Golden" at Buckingham Palace's changing of the guard.

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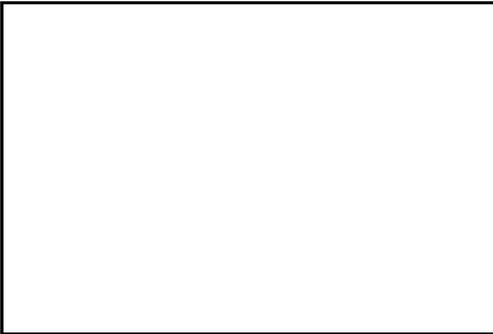
# Stray Kids keep breaking records

Another year, another set of records broken by K-pop mega-group Stray Kids, whose dominATE World Tour was the second-most-successful global tour of 2025 (behind Beyoncé), according to Pollstar. Stray Kids also continued to break their own records with each new album. With their November mixtape *Do It*, the boy band became the only act in history to debut at Number One with eight consecutive album releases on the *Billboard* 200, a streak that started with 2022's *Ordinary*.

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## Hwasa's "Good Goodbye" goes viral

A breakout star from the group Mamamoo, singer Hwasa made her debut on the *Billboard* Global 200 at Number 43 this year, thanks to her bittersweet "Good Goodbye." The song chronicles her real-life breakup, which she hopes will remain a *good goodbye*. Wanting peace and happiness for herself and her ex, she conveys optimism in the song's catchy chorus. The music video is enhanced by the inclusion of her longtime crush (actor Park Jeong-min) playing the role of the ex. Driven by their sizzling-hot chemistry during a performance at a Korean awards show, the song went viral. Back home, it debuted at Number One on the *Billboard* Korea Hot 100. Hwasa became the lone solo female artist of 2025 to achieve what's called a Perfect All-Kill in the Korean music business when "Good Goodbye" ranked Number One simultaneously on all of South Korea's major daily, weekly and real-time music charts.

## Bain courageously comes out

In an unexpected move, Just B member Bain came out during a concert performance in Los Angeles. "Tonight I'm going to share something with you guys," he told the audience. "I'm fucking proud to be a part of the LGBTQ community as a gay person. To anyone out there who's part of the LGBTQ community, or still figuring it out, this is for you guys. You are seen. You are loved. You are born this way." With that he launched into a cover of Lady Gaga's "Born This Way," making a powerful statement about who he is. Bain is one of the few Korean celebrities to publicly announce that he is gay.

# TWICE make history

Lollapalooza. *Kpop Demon Hunters*. Victoria's Secret — TWICE did it all in 2025. The nine-member girl group made history as the first female K-pop act to headline at Lollapalooza — or *Twicepalooza*, as their fans dubbed the event — this summer in Chicago. Backed by a live band, TWICE performed a set that spanned their decade-long career. Additionally, Jihyo, Chaeyoung, and Jeongyeon recorded “Takedown” for the *KPop Demon Hunters* soundtrack. Notably, the members appear in human form singing the track at the end of the film. “We didn’t accept this because we knew it would be a huge success,” Chaeyoung told *Rolling Stone*. “It just sounded like fun. The soundtrack itself is very different from our style, so it was an opportunity to challenge ourselves.” In October, TWICE became the first K-pop group to perform at the Victoria's Secret Fashion Show. (Blackpink's Lisa performed as a solo artist in 2024.) Jihyo, Nayeon, Momo, and Tzuyu performed wearing lingerie from the brand's Pink line. The push-up bra worn by Tzuyu sold out shortly after their appearance.

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**TWICE photographed for *Rolling Stone* at Lollapalooza 2025**

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## **K-pop Idols become breakout actors**

K-pop idols are trained to be all-around entertainers who excel at singing, dancing, hosting, and often acting. This year, some of the most memorable acting roles went to idols. Big Bang's T.O.P. played the love-to-hate-him rapper Thanos in the second and third seasons of *Squid Game*. D.O of EXO took on the role of a chilling villain in the K-drama *The Manipulated*. Kim Yo-han (Wei) tackled the rugby underdog series *The Winning Try*. Yook Sung-jae (BtoB) starred in the historical drama

*The Haunted Palace*. And Omega X's Kevin had lead billing in the Boys' Love romance series *My Bias Is Showing*. Meanwhile, Korean American solo singer-songwriter Eric Nam and *Kpop Demon Hunters* voice actress Ji-Young Yoo were cast this summer in an as-yet-titled K-pop musical film from Paramount Pictures and Hybe America — the first major American movie to be filmed entirely in South Korea — which is due out on Feb. 12, 2027.

## **Blackpink are ... *everywhere***

As if performing worldwide on their Deadline World Tour wasn't enough, the individual members of Blackpink achieved notable accomplishments as solo artists in 2025. In September, "APT.," by Rosé and Bruno Mars, became the fastest K-pop video to reach 2 billion YouTube views, besting the previous record held by PSY's "Gangnam Style." Based on a Korean drinking game, the global hit single has been nominated for Grammys, including Song of the Year, Record of the Year, and Best Pop Duo/Group Performance. Lisa released her solo album, *Alter Ego*, and made her acting debut in the Emmy Award-winning series *The White Lotus*. And Netflix just announced that the Thai rapper-singer has signed on for her first feature-film role, opposite Korean superstar Don Lee, in the action film *Tygo*, which is part of the *Extraction* universe. Meanwhile, Jisoo starred in the film *Omniscient Reader: The Prophecy* and the K-drama *Newtopia*. She is the female lead in the K-drama *Boyfriend on Demand*, which is scheduled for release next year. And Jennie followed up her debut solo album, *Ruby*, which ranked Number 29 on Rolling Stone's 100 Best Albums of 2025 list, with the solo tour *The Ruby Experience*.

# Cortis, KiiiKiii, and Allday Project take risks and win big

K-pop groups generally make their debuts polished and polite, with cute concepts and pleasant songs. But groups like Cortis and KiiiKiii have embraced an adventurous sense of musical weirdness, opting for raw energy and slightly messy concepts meant to entice potential fans by giving them something different. Allday Project also debuted this year as the first co-ed K-pop group since KARD, almost a decade ago. The group got its name from will.i.am of Black Eyed Peas, who is a major fan. But he's not even the group's most influential connection. Rapper Annie is the first *chaebol* heiress K-pop idol. Her family founded and runs Shinsegae, a powerful South Korean retail conglomerate.

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## Waterbomb Festival, the world's wettest music fest

The annual Waterbomb Festival is part music event and part wet T-shirt contest — and it's always a huge success. Both male and female idols (and the crowds) are drenched by water canons throughout the festival. Monsta X's Shownu — who's never been shy about ripping off his shirt — was a fan favorite this year at Waterbombs in South Korea and Vietnam. Female idols are generally not as overt about their sexuality on stage, so a huge *hell yeah* to Kwon Eun-bi, who embraced the fun by wearing bikini tops at Waterbomb. Known as the Waterbomb Goddess, Kwon goes viral every year with her fun and sexy performances. This year, JYPE founder Park Jin-young dressed up in hot pink to dazzle the crowd. While he doesn't share the idol looks of the groups on his label, he has idol energy to spare.

## **The long-awaited return of BTS**

In 2021, RM of BTS told *Rolling Stone*, “We don't actually really care about whether people see us as inside or outside K-pop. The important fact is that we're all Koreans, and we're singing a pop song.” BTS' loyal fandom, ARMY, will passionately debate whether or not BTS is K-pop. But it's undeniable that the septet are the biggest, most influential global pop act in the history of South Korean music. 2025 marked the year that all seven members returned from military duty, which is mandatory for all able-bodied South Korean men. Jin released the album *Echo* and went on an international tour. Jung Kook became the first Asian solo artist to garner 100 million streams on every original track on Spotify. Jimin released his 2024 solo album, *Muse*, on vinyl and won the best K-pop Song of the Year award, for “Who,” at this year's iHeartRadio Music Awards. RM and Epik High's Tablo delivered the introspective “Stop the Rain.” J-hope released the singles “Sweet

Dreams,” “Mona Lisa,” and “Killin’ It Girl,” headlined a solo tour, and then collaborated with Le Sserafim on “Spaghetti.” V’s “Winter Ahead” (with Park Hyo-shin) became the fastest jazz song to surpass 500 million streams on Spotify. He also released his artistic photo book, *Rêvé*. And Suga founded a treatment center in South Korea to support children with autism spectrum disorder. Then on July 1, BTS gave ARMY the news fans had waited too long to hear. In a joint live broadcast on Weverse, the members confirmed that they would release a brand-new studio album in the upcoming spring. An extensive world tour is also in the works, with at least 30 concerts expected in North America. This as-yet-named tour will be the first since BTS’ Permission to Dance on Stage in 2022, which was followed later that year with the free one-off concert Yet to Come, in Busan, South Korea.

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