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BACK TOGETHER

'BTS: THE RETURN': SIX THINGS WE LEARNED FROM THE REVEALING NEW DOCUMENTARY

The Netflix film offers insight into the pressures faced by the superstar group as they came back from military service to make their new album, *Arirang*

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When **BTS** debuted in 2013, no one expected much from the scrappy septet. They were a young group from a then-no-name music company that had yet to produce a superstar. If the hip-hop-heavy group was lucky, they'd maybe last a few years before splintering off in different directions. But that's not how it turned out. Through blood, sweat, tears, and a strong sense of self and talent, BTS transcended the K-pop label to become one of the bestselling pop acts in the world. Full stop.

In Bao Nguyen's thoughtful documentary, *BTS: The Return* (premiering on Netflix on March 27), the filmmaker doesn't present a sanitized version of the group's story. Instead, viewers are privy to meetings with management, where the members' artistry doesn't always align with the business model's bottom line. To everyone's credit, these politely adversarial scenes between artists and management were left in the documentary for viewers to ponder. What if BTS had taken a different direction? What if they hadn't selected "Arirang," a beloved Korean folk song, as the core concept of their new album Arirang?

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Over a Korean dinner in a rented Los Angeles home, where they were spending a couple months working on *Arirang*, the members are visibly exhausted and a little frustrated that they're not making quicker progress. "I just want to have fun making music," J-Hope says. "But I feel like we're holding back. We're kind of operating like a factory." V adds that they're supposed to be doing something experimental and different, "but it doesn't feel different." Jimin adds, "This album is so special because it's been so long [since our last record]. But the issue is that we wanted to avoid taking a long break after our military discharge. But now it feels like we're rushing through this project."

Maybe it wasn't Nguyen's intent, but the emphasis on the time — or lack of it — that BTS spent making *Arirang* could be positively viewed as a pop-culture allegory of how quickly South Korea rose from the ashes of the Korean War into a highly developed and rich nation. Great things can happen in a short period of time. But the film also questions, at what cost?

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The monotony of daily life reminds the members of their mandatory military duty.

동반입대 is a Korean phrase that refers to friends joining the military together, serving in the same unit, and being each other's moral support during their roughly 18 months of enlistment. Of the seven, Jimin and Jung Kook were the only BTS members who served in this companion program, but the group's shared experience of serving their country is brought up throughout the documentary in small snippets. RM worries that waking up every day and doing the same things as they work on *Arirang* is too similar to what they went through in the army. "Personally, I really hate to be stuck in a routine," he says. "We spent a year and a half in the military, and now it all feels like a dream. It feels like we were never there... Things change and trends shift all the time. Newer artists are breaking into the industry all the time. We have to change, too. How are we supposed to evolve and grow if we keep pushing against the tide? That's just existing." But there's also levity interspersed with the more contemplative moments. At one point, the group groans and laughs raucously when RM picks up his saxophone and blasts out the army's morning reveille.

Jimin is a homebody.

Onstage, Jimin is a menace in the best possible ways. But in private, being home is the best, he says. Jimin's a gentle homebody who washes his plates until they literally squeak with cleanliness, proudly points out the dish towel his mother gave him, and watches educational science shows as he eats his carryout meals. "These are the types of videos I like to watch when I'm eating or trying to sleep," he says, engrossed in a show featuring archaeologists chatting at a Korean university. "I like it when I don't have anything to do and don't have to work out," he says, quietly. "I wasn't always an introvert, but as I got older, it just happened. I could sit here for 10 hours alone."

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Jin has no songwriting credits on *Arirang*. Here's why.

The first member to enlist, Jin went back to work the day after his enlistment ended. He recorded two solo EPs and sold out every venue on his *#RunSeokjin EP* tour. In other words, through his individual work, he kept the BTS brand alive while his bandmates were out of the public eye. Because of his tour obligations, he joined the others in Los Angeles later, after the others had already worked through most of the songs that would end up on *Arirang*. He mentions that it would

have been ideal if they could've delayed recording the album until his tour had completed, but he understands the reasoning behind the tight schedule. "They made a really nice album while I was on tour," he says. "Coming in late and not really knowing where everyone's at is scary, because I have to figure out where I fit into all of this. But having spent the last 12 years together, I've kind of known what to do without being told. ... I'm not even sure where I am." V offers comfort by commiserating and tells him, "Don't worry, *hyung*. We can do this!"

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Jin usually is the member who doesn't dwell on personal difficulties. But in a vulnerable moment, the eldest member reveals that he had a rough time powering through his tour when he was sick. "I took a ton of medicine," he tells his bandmates. "I had to get an IV about five times." As Jin leaves the mansion to head back to Seoul, he sings a traditional snippet of "Arirang" that would've made a compelling coda on the album.

There's a lot of pressure to speak English.

As if creating a new album under strict time constraints isn't enough pressure, BTS are encouraged to include more English into their songs to attract a larger portion of the global audience. While it may make business sense, it's a tough request to make of artists who — with the exception of RM — aren't fluent in English. Just 12 minutes into the documentary, Jimin is visibly frustrated with how he sounds singing English lyrics. Bang Si-hyuk, chairman of Hybe and BTS' chief producer, agrees with Nicole Kim, the vice president of BigHit Music, that they need to appeal to the global market. Suga pushes back, pointing out that "there's so much English in the songs already. I want to add more Korean." RM adds, "I agree. There's a level of authenticity we need to have here." Later, there's a shot of RM working on a song. He's concerned that the lyrics he wrote sound unnatural, because English isn't his dominant language. With the impending deadline hanging over their heads, there isn't much time to get everyone's English pronunciations up to par. RM says they're experiencing a slump. After their longtime producer Pdogg jokes that "Slump" could be a great song, V puckishly asks, "What if we made the [title track] really depressing and sad?"

The weight of "Arirang" means a lot to them.

"Arirang' is a song that describes *han* — deep sorrow and longing," RM says. "Our people sang it to overcome pain and suffering. As a Korean person, the thought of sampling this famous traditional song felt right. That was my first reaction. Then I realized the weight 'Arirang' carries. But once we decided to lean into it, we committed all the way."

In a meeting with Hybe's Bang, the chairman wants the group to include a longer sample of "Arirang" than they preferred. J-Hope flat out says no, because a longer sample would be overkill. Jung Kook points out that not all their fans will understand the significance of "Arirang." And RM agrees that the shorter sample fits better into the song.

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Bang takes a step back. “We all know that a group like BTS only comes along once every few decades,” he concedes. “We’re in a situation where your target audience extends beyond just Korea ... but there’s no denying you’re a Korean group. Ultimately, though, it’s your decision.” As RM had already pointed out, “We get to wear this huge crown, but it’s heavy and scary to wear.” Thinking about where he’s at in life, Jung Kook says, “This intense level of fame can be a lot to carry. I’m not really that special. There’s a part of me that wants to be seen as a singer and nothing else.”

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Ultimately, the shorter “Arirang” sample is the one that’s featured on “Body to Body.”

So does the impermanence of time.

“In old Greece, there were two ways of thinking about time,” RM says in English. “One is *chronos*, and one is *kairos*. In the military, we had to do the same thing over and over again. Time just passed by. That was *chronos*. But here in L.A., time with the members — my second family — this feels like *kairos*. Time really stretches and you really feel.... I don’t know how to say it in English. 무상함 [impermanence] of time.” In arguably the most compelling cinematic sequence of the documentary, the camera pans to the members splashing around, laughing, and competing to see who can stay underwater the longest. All the while, Phoenix’s “Love Like a Sunset, Pt. II” plays softly in the background. The French indie pop band’s song includes the line, “Where it starts, it ends.” This lyric can be interpreted as bittersweet, but it also fits in with what BTS has always maintained. They are in this Bangtan life forever. Where they started is where it will one day end. Together.

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