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GRAMMY DRAMA

BTS BOYCOTT THE GRAMMYS, BUT WILL OTHER ARTISTS FOLLOW?

Experts say the group's decision reflects their unique status in the industry

By JAE-HA KIM

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RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V and Jung Kook of BTS at the World Cup 2026 halftime show.

FLORENCIA TAN JUN/GETTY IMAGES



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On July 29 — a month after the Recording Academy created a new Best Asian Pop Music Performance category for the Grammy Awards — the seven BTS members shared a collective message on their individual Instagram accounts that made international headlines. “We have decided not to submit an entry for Grammy consideration this year,” they wrote. “We hope music can be heard and loved for what it is, rather than being divided by region or language. We thank [our fandom] ARMY and everyone who has always stood by us.”

Many focused on RM, Jin, Suga, J-Hope, Jimin, V, and Jung Kook’s choice to relay their message in Korean, rather than English. That choice was widely interpreted as indicating their unwillingness to be marginalized and then funneled into a niche category that is widely speculated to have been created as a way to deal with the popularity of K-pop without rewarding the artists in more equitable general fields like Album of the Year or Record of the Year. (Grammy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. moved quickly to respond, saying he was “saddened” by BTS’ decision and adding, “The Asian Pop category was created to celebrate the depth, diversity and extraordinary growth of pop artistry coming out of Asia...More categories mean more artists’ work is recognized.”)

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Just as notably, though, few other musicians have openly joined BTS' Grammy boycott. Experts say that's because **BTS** occupy a unique position in the music business in 2026. Their surprising decision follows the immense success of their critically-acclaimed album ***Arirang***. The album was released in March after the group returned from fulfilling their mandatory military duty, a requirement of almost all able-bodied South Korean men; it immediately topped charts around the world and won rave reviews.

"To me, [BTS' decision] signals that they have reached a point in their career where they no longer feel the need to seek validation from Western institutions," Hye Jin Lee, a University of Southern California professor who specializes in Korean pop culture, tells *Rolling Stone*. "That's a very

different position from where they were five or six years ago.”

Asked if she believes other Korean and Asian artists might follow their lead, Lee points to reports that BTS’ management company, HYBE, plans to continue submitting work from other artists. “HYBE made it clear that this was BTS’ decision and that other artists under the label are free to make their own choices. More importantly though, there simply aren’t many Korean or Asian artists with BTS’ level of global influence at the moment. Even if another artist made the same decision, I’m not convinced it would generate the same level of discussion.”

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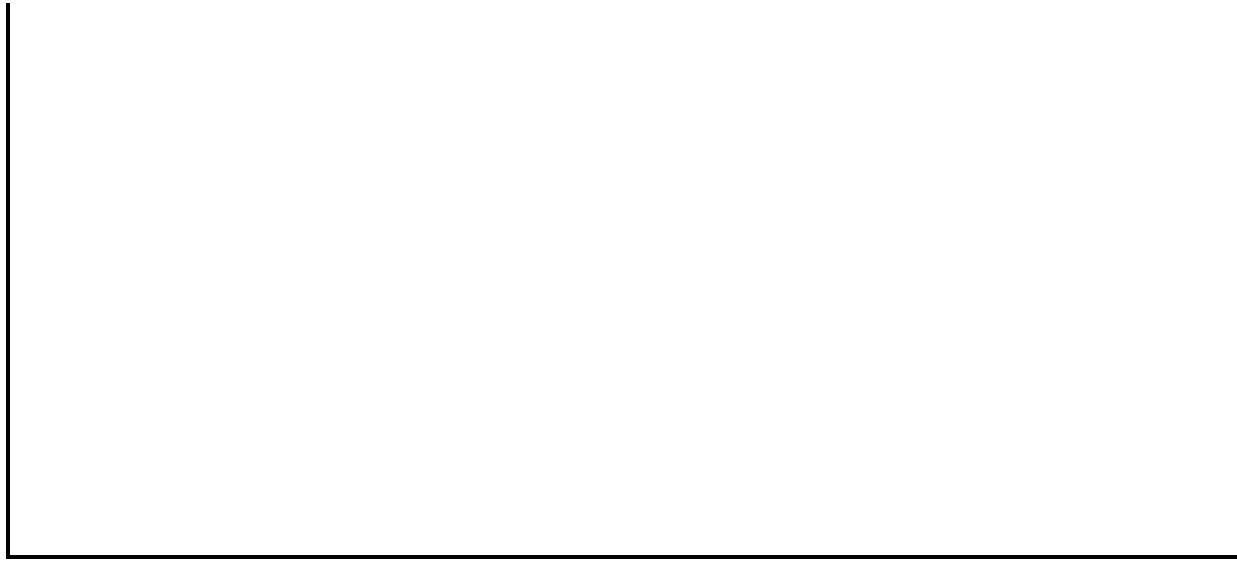
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As expected, BTS' loyal ARMY have supported the group's decision and called out the Grammys for being clueless. Some well-known creatives have also celebrated BTS' stance online. Maggie Kang, the Korean Canadian co-director of the hit animated film *KPop Demon Hunters*, shared a news article about BTS' statement and added the clapping emoji. Tablo, the leader of the Korean hip-hop trio Epik High, shared RM's Instagram story and added, "ARIRANG > Grammys." Likewise, Bang Yongguk of B.A.P — a K-pop group that debuted in 2012 — shared a news story about BTS and the Grammys with his Instagram followers. Korean American actor Daniel Dae Kim, who also hosts CNN's *K-Everything* series, did the same.



For some observers, this controversy recalls the Grammys' choice in 1989 to create a Hard Rock/Metal category to honor those genres. In one of their most memorable mishaps, the voting members gave the inaugural award to the progressive rock band Jethro Tull, best known for its work in the Seventies, rather than to a current hard rock or metal act like Metallica or AC/DC.

The Grammys couldn't differentiate between hard rock and prog rock back then. And now, almost four decades later, it appears they have oversimplified what Asian Pop even is — the most relevant point being that Asia is not a genre, it's a continent composed of about 50 countries. Are the Grammys hoping that most viewers will assume the category centers on East Asian countries like South Korea, Japan, and China that already have

idol systems in place — rather than nominees from, say, Syria or Kyrgyzstan?

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“The Academy is made up of many people and I am sure some of them saw this [new category] as being inclusive,” professor and K-pop expert CedarBough T. Saeji of Pusan National University tells *Rolling Stone* via email. “But nothing about Record of the Year, or Song of the Year, or Best Pop Duo/Group Performance needs to exclude music made by non-Americans.”

Anton Hur, one of the co-translators of the group’s bestselling book *Beyond the Story: 10-Year Record of BTS*, wrote on social media, “I love what BTS did, this was the right decision. I often count the number of POC/Asian nominees in a book prize longlist, and when I see just one, I can tell immediately it was the token pick. ... BTS was always being used to shore

up viewer numbers for the Grammys. Now they're telling the Grammys to fcuk *[sic]* off. Good for them. I hope the rest of Korea learns from this."

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Producer and songwriter Sleep DeeZ was part of the Black Eyed Peas' Grammy-winning album *The E.N.D.* and has previously collaborated with BTS. "I genuinely want Asian artists to receive recognition," he tells *Rolling Stone*. "My concern isn't with honoring Asian music, it's with how that recognition is structured. Same with the Best African Music Performance category Grammy [introduced in 2024]. It's a first step, but Africa has over

50 countries with different cultural and sonic influences that have trickled into western pop over the past decade.”

In other words, recognition matters, but true, impartial inclusion matters even more. “The long-term goal should be for artists from Korea, Japan, the Philippines, India, or anywhere else to compete naturally in the same categories as everyone else,” he continues. “That’s what true global acceptance looks like. Music should be competing based on artistic excellence, not separated by geography or ethnicity. Imagine creating a category specifically because of where artists come from rather than allowing them to compete alongside everyone else. Even if the intention is positive, it can unintentionally reinforce the idea that they’re playing in a separate league.”

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