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**BEYOND  
THE  
STORY**

**10-YEAR RECORD  
OF BTS**

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BTS**

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**MACMILLAN**

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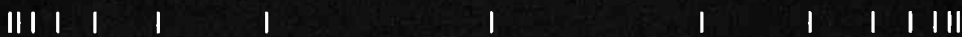
CHAPTER 1



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SEOUL



## 13–20

Korea's busiest crossroads is in Seoul's district of Gangnam, near Sinsa Station. Those driving down the Hannam Bridge over the Han River into Gangnam will pass through this crossroads before heading to different parts of the district, like Nonhyeon, Cheongdam, or Apgujeong. When there's a lot of traffic, drivers might be staring up at the traffic lights for tens of minutes, waiting for their turn, which is why the subway is probably the best way to get to Sinsa Station, if that's your destination.

But if your destination is specifically somewhere near Exit 1 of Sinsa Station, that's a slightly different story—for example, if you happen to be heading for the Cheonggu Building, which in 2010 housed Big Hit Entertainment, later known as HYBE.

Seoul, Gangnam-gu, Dosandaero 16-gil 13–20. Even with the address, it's not easy to find the Cheonggu Building if you have never been to Gangnam or the Sinsa Station crossroads. According to the KakaoMap app, the distance between this building and Exit 1 is 568 meters. But it's impossible to tell from the map that the building is near the end of a steep incline. Nor that several pivots along the way are necessary in order to reach it. Unless you're driving there with the aid of GPS navigation, it could be a bit of an effort and wandering around to find Cheonggu Building.

——I was at a loss.

Such was the case for Jung Ho-seok, who would debut three years later as j-hope of BTS. After signing a trainee contract with Big Hit Entertainment in April 2010, he was undergoing training in his native city of Gwangju when the company ordered him to move into the Big

Hit Entertainment trainee dormitory near the Cheonggu Building in Seoul. He arrived on December 24, 2010.

———I was so scared. It was Christmas Eve and the streets were full of cheerful people, but I couldn't get my bearings at all.

Never had he ridden the Seoul subway or experienced Christmas Eve in trendy Sinsa-dong. This was an area with high foot traffic, even for Seoul, but the elusive location of the dormitory was as intimidating to j-hope as the crowded subway or the unfamiliar vista of the Sinsa neighborhood.

———I kept saying, "This is frustrating!" and ended up calling the then head of A&R. "So, how do I get there?"

After his call, he "kept going straight, and like, somehow and somehow" to use his words, and finally arrived at the dorm. This was the beginning of his dorm life, which he had been looking forward to since the day before and which he still remembered vividly ten years later. On that day, however, he was in for a shock.

———SUGA was there in his underwear (laughs). There were leftover trotters in the sink, laundry strewn on the floor, and everyone walking around in their underwear. 'I guess this is dorm life?' I thought.

## **Big Hit Entertainment**

About a month and a half before this, in the beginning of November, Min Yoon-gi—who would debut as SUGA of BTS—had arrived at Sinsa Station Exit 1, just as j-hope would, and was looking for the dorm.

——My parents dropped me off. There's a practice studio in the basement of Yujeong Restaurant near the Cheonggu Building. I stood there until Pdogg came out and took me inside. My parents told me later that I looked like I was being dragged off somewhere (laughs).

SUGA was seventeen years old at the time. He was a bit too young to leave his hometown of Daegu to come up to Seoul just because he wanted a career in music. But in Korea, it is difficult to grow into a mainstream artist if one doesn't happen to be in Seoul.

——I was in a dance crew in Daegu, and there was a studio I worked in. But the pie was just too small. We might have an event gig from time to time? Sometimes we were paid in tickets for our performances, not money. Not that we were doing it for the money necessarily, but I wonder if we should've at least been paid enough to buy a meal, and a lot of times we weren't paid even that.

By the time SUGA entered Big Hit Entertainment, he was already a paid songwriter working in Daegu. He attended music hagwons to learn MIDI, was introduced to composers, and went from studio to studio doing all kinds of work. Back then, there was no arts high school that taught mainstream music in Daegu, which was why for a time he studied classical music with an eye on entering arts high school that way. He learned different kinds of music from various musicians, composing everything from school songs to trot. But for a teenager dreaming of a career as a professional musician, especially a teenager obsessed with hip-hop, his prospects outside of Seoul were slim.

——Hip-hop wasn't very mainstream in Daegu at the time. This was

when people made fun of rappers, calling them “hip-hop warriors,” and when the hyoungs I made music with did cyphers<sup>1</sup> in the park, we’d get maybe twenty people as an audience. And our first one had two people.

It was a fairly reasonable choice for SUGA to head to Seoul, in retrospect. Indeed, SUGA and j-hope had deliberately made the decision to enter the idol audition process before joining Big Hit Entertainment as trainees; j-hope had undertaken auditions with other companies and already had specific dreams of debuting as a singer by the time his dance hagwon recommended him for an audition with Big Hit.

As Korean idol groups became explosively popular in the 2000s, not only domestically but internationally, teenagers aspiring to stardom flocked to famous dance hagwons that not only taught dance but also introduced promising students to entertainment companies in Seoul. This was also how j-hope’s initial training was outsourced to Gwangju before he entered the dorm in Seoul.

———The Big Hit A&R people came to Gwangju and sat in on the auditions in person. I danced for them, and then did eight months of outsourced training after I succeeded in the audition. Once a month during this training, I made videos of myself dancing and singing to send to the company.

Meanwhile, SUGA, who was already a professional songwriter, became interested in a particular person at Big Hit Entertainment.

———I always liked the songwriter Bang Si-Hyuk. I really liked the T-ara song “Like the First Time,” and learned that Bang had

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<sup>1</sup> A hip-hop term for rappers gathering in a circle and taking turns making up verses to the same beat.

written that song. He wasn't on television or anything back then, but he was already famous as a songwriter among people in the know.

For teenagers with limited insider knowledge of the entertainment industry, trusting a company recommended by one's dance hagwon or taking an audition because a favorite songwriter happened to work there was the best course of action.

Even before the incredible success of today's BTS, Big Hit Entertainment in 2010 was already a well-respected company, more than worthy to be a young musician's dream company. Bang Si-Hyuk—the current chair of HYBE—established Big Hit in 2005, and by the time j-hope and SUGA had signed on, he had raised a string of successful artists like 8Eight, J-Lim, and 2AM to stardom. 2AM's "Can't Let You Go Even if I Die" in particular, composed by Bang, was a massive hit that rocketed the team to supremacy. Big Hit Entertainment was hardly small fry in the scheme of things, with a stable of successful artists and the owner and main producer of the company well-known for his ability to consistently crank out hits.

But the team Big Hit was trying to build at the time with trainees like SUGA and j-hope, the team that would become BTS, was proving to be something of a new challenge for Bang Si-Hyuk.

The making of a K-pop idol group is like the production of a Hollywood blockbuster. Everything converges into a single effort, including capital, planning, advertising and PR, and even the brand value of the company itself. In spite of this, the industry was so competitive that only about five boy groups and five girl groups in a decade could be considered successful. Most of these popular groups came from what was known as "the big three": SM Entertainment,

YG Entertainment, and JYP Entertainment. These companies, like Hollywood's major studios, had the lion's share of capital and industry know-how.

Big Hit, of course, had 2AM. But co-label JYP was the one that led the effort from training to launch. That was why for Big Hit Entertainment, the process of casting, training, and launching was a whole new venture.

And it went without saying that this whole process was much more difficult and costly than simply launching a balladeer. Idol groups need simultaneous mastery of song and dance on stage, and all that singing and dancing need to be trained into them, which means enough practice space is needed to teach scores of trainees vocals and dance. For those, like SUGA and j-hope, who moved away from home, as well as whoever happens to show high potential and is therefore deemed closer to debuting, room and board need to be provided. To prepare an idol group for their debut requires not only offices for the company itself but literal "spaces" for all of the above.

This was why j-hope could only be taken aback by what he saw that Christmas Eve when he first entered the dorm. Big Hit Entertainment was a major company in the entertainment industry, one that a budding artist like j-hope could trust to nurture his talent. But in some ways, the company was arguably closer to being a kind of start-up, with administrative offices and recording studios in cramped quarters on the second floor.

Bang Si-Hyuk used one of those tiny rooms for his artistic and administrative work, including meetings. It was so small that there was room for no more than three people, and that third person would have

to sit on the floor. Instead of bringing all the trainees into the same building, Bang rented practice space and accommodations around the Cheonggu Building.

These spaces, like their offices, were only just enough for their most basic functions, which is apparent when contrasting Jung Kook's practice footage from February 2013\* with the BTS dance footage filmed in HYBE HQ.\*\* In 2013, Big Hit clearly had everything they needed and more for a company of their size. But compared to "the big three," they might as well have had nothing.

One thing Big Hit had a disproportionate abundance of was people. Take the trainees, for instance. There were about fifteen male trainees vying to become BTS. At one point, there had been twenty trainees competing to join the girl group Glam, which debuted a year before BTS. And importantly, Big Hit also had the producer and content creator Bang Si-Hyuk, the producer Pdogg, and the performance director Son Sungdeuk.

But for the two teenagers who had come up to Seoul from Daegu and Gwangju, the first thing that made a big impression, like SUGA's comment about moving into the dorm, was the fact that there were a whole lot of other teens their age with similar interests. SUGA remembers:

——I went to the recording studio and RM and Supreme Boi were there, and other trainees, and we got all excited just talking about music.



**Rap Den**

RM,<sup>2</sup> who would become the leader of BTS, spent his teens as Kim Nam-joon in the city of Ilsan, Gyeonggi Province. He remembers the municipality as “a city where everything was satisfying.”

———The city was so well-planned when it was built, and all the green spaces had an emotionally calming effect.

The city was home to the Ilsan Lake Park, which was easily accessible to anyone who lived in the vicinity. The residential areas were mostly apartment complexes, and there were the two large commercial zones: La Festa and Western Dom. The city was indeed planned out from its very founding, with impeccably arranged roads and facilities. The entire city was spacious and peaceful for most of the week, with the two commercial districts becoming busier and more festive from Friday night through the weekend.

———It’s a place where there’s a certain feeling of comfort. There’s a little of that city gray and the bored faces of pedestrians, but there are no tall buildings or big corporate offices, which makes the sky easier to see. It has an excellent environment for concentrating on your studies. It’s not the countryside, but it feels like that to me.

While near Seoul, Ilsan wasn’t as large or bustling as the capital, which became a factor in RM discovering hip-hop. He started going online in first grade and learned about rap through Nas and interviews and documentaries of hip-hop artists on YouTube, while picking up English along the way.

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<sup>2</sup> RM’s moniker since 2012 was initially “Rap Monster” until he changed it to “RM” on November 13, 2017, in the spirit of embracing a wider variety of music.

But offline, the life of middle-schooler Kim Nam-joon was at somewhat of a distance from hip-hop. It was about as far as the distance between Ilsan and Seoul's Hongik University neighborhood.

——If Ilsan offered any advantage to hip-hop, it was the fact that Sinchon and Hongdae were so close. Just a bus ride away. It was my dream to perform in places like Drug or Geek Live House, which don't exist anymore, and maybe in a bigger place like Rollinghall later on.<sup>3</sup> That place could hold 500 people.

A bus ride from Ilsan to Hongdae took a little less than an hour. But if a weekend in Ilsan meant a family of three or four taking a stroll around the lake in the park, a weekend in Hongdae and Sinchon meant rappers and aspiring rappers and their audiences gathering in clubs.

When RM made the decision to audition with hip-hop label Big Deal Records in 2009 to become a professional rapper, it didn't mean he would simply be going back and forth on a bus between Ilsan and Hongdae. It meant jumping into a world he had only seen online, a world completely different from the city he had loved so much that he said, "It's a privilege to have been born in Ilsan." Not only that, but the place where he ended up arriving wasn't Hongdae but Gangnam.

——I made the first cut, so in my second audition I got to perform with artists who had debuted, but I messed up the words. I thought it was over for me.

But interestingly enough, a friend of the rapper Sleepy of the hip-hop duo Untouchable happened to come to the afterparty for the audition,

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<sup>3</sup> In 2022, a few days after the December 2 release of his solo album *Indigo*, RM would hold a small concert for two hundred fans at Rollinghall on December 5.

and he mentioned that Sleepy had been interested in RM's work recently and took his phone number.

———Sleepy said he'd seen me at an audition. He must've been impressed because he talked about me and asked for me. So I gave my phone number to his friend to pass on to him. That's how we wrote emails to each other. Sleepy happened to be old friends with Pdogg. And when Pdogg asked him, "Do you know any rappers who are young?" he recommended me.

Then came the call featured in "A Common Trainee's Christmas" posted on the BTS blog<sup>4</sup> pre-debut: "A bumpkin from Ilsan / who made the top 1% nationwide / suddenly gets a call during midterms." Sleepy called RM and asked, "Hey, do you know this guy named Bang Si-Hyuk?"

RM, who had made the top percentile in his national mock exams. SUGA, who had been writing songs since he was twelve and was already a professional musician in high school. And the other trainees in the dorm, who had auditioned for Big Hit Entertainment as rappers and hip-hop fanatics. For all of them, dorm life was crucial to their development in a musical sense, especially if their music happened to be hip-hop and rap. According to j-hope:

———It was a rap den, a den of rap.

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<sup>4</sup> In December 2012, approximately six months before their debut, BTS launched their official blog—which they themselves managed—and their Twitter account.



At the time of his audition, j-hope did not know how to rap at all. He did Yoonmirae's "Black Happiness" for the rap portion, but he felt so dissatisfied with it that he feared he had failed his audition. To j-hope, the happenings in the dorm must've come as quite a culture shock. He recalls:

———Wow, as soon as you walk into that dorm, the kids just started freestyle rapping at you. I couldn't do any of that! Every weekend, the company filmed us rapping freestyle. But then they'd come back to the dorm and keep putting on beats and doing rap.

The dorm overflowed with hip-hop, with impromptu singalongs to songs like Wiz Khalifa's "Black and Yellow" going on in the middle of the night.

Those dormitory days where hip-hop was work, play, and life all rolled into one for a bunch of teenagers would play an important part in the formation of BTS's identity in the coming years. On hip-hop, and the group's special bond, j-hope would say:

———You couldn't *not* rap in that environment. And everyone was so encouraging to me there. I asked them all sorts of stuff about rap and studied up on it and just learned a lot.

Although j-hope was a rap newbie, the beats-filled life at the dorm made him quickly fall in love with hip-hop, which also allowed him to forge new friendships with his fellow trainees. A place where rappers and this dancer who now rapped had gathered to train as professional musicians—this was what j-hope refers to as "Season 1" of their dorm life.

"Season 2" began with the arrival of Jung Kook.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This narrative follows the order of the members entering the trainee dorms, which is RM, SUGA, j-hope, Jung Kook, V, Jimin, and Jin. The order of BTS members entering Bit Hit Entertainment as trainees is j-hope, RM, SUGA, Jin, Jung Kook, V, and Jimin. RM would go on to become the first trainee confirmed to debut as BTS.