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FORMER 2PM FRONTMAN

JAY PARK

WENT FROM SUPERSTARDOM TO WORKING IN A TIRE SHOP. ONE VIRAL VIDEO LATER, THE NOW-SOLO SINGER IS **READY TO TAKE OVER AMERICA AND THE WORLD.**



VIEWS AND ANALYSIS ON THE DEATH OF

KIM JONG-IL

1,000 AND COUNTING:
The 'comfort women' and their ongoing protest for justice

MARK NO. 10 FOR THE UNFORGETTABLE GALA
(It's raining photos, starting on page 44.)





In His Own Words

Seattle native **Jay Park** managed to climb to the top of the K-pop scene as the charismatic leader of 2PM. But when the young performer made some "anti-Korean" comments on his MySpace page and later allegedly confessed to some "severe personal mistake," according to his record label, he found himself excised from the band and Korea. The singer was prepared to return to a life of obscurity, dancing with his old crew and taking a job at a tire shop in his hometown, but then a certain YouTube video launched him back into the spotlight—his loyal fans in tow. Now, Jay Park is back, making music and movies, and this time, he's calling the shots.

by **Rebecca U. Cho**
photographs by **Bundo**

Slumped in a chair, bleached bangs tucked under a Los Angeles Knocksteady cap, K-pop superstar Jay Park is trying to set the record straight on his so-called comeback to the Korean music scene.

"I was never trying to relaunch my career. That was never the goal," says Park, 24.

Whatever his intentions, the former leader of the uber-popular South Korean boy group 2PM—whose dramatic exit from the group more than two years ago and subsequent return home to Seattle inspired flash mobs around the world in protest—is back.

And his worldwide fan base, the so-called "Jaywalkers," is fueling his return to super stardom. The Korean American's frequent tweets are followed by nearly 300,000 users. And when he first returned to South Korea in the summer of 2010, more than a thousand screaming fans at Incheon International Airport greeted a stunned-looking Park, who had to be accompanied to his car by a shield of security guards.

In the past year, he's tackled his solo career with ferocity, as someone trying to start anew, shaking off his painful past



with the Korean public, which built him up as the next hot star, only to tear him down in what some have called a viral witch hunt. He's showcased his multifaceted talents as a singer, songwriter, b-boy and even actor, releasing the mini-album *Take A Deeper Look*, with all self-written tracks, and appearing in his first feature film, *Mr. Idol*, which was released last November in Korea.

His new solo album, which Park has tentatively titled *One of a Kind*, is planned for release in early 2012.

On the chilly December night when this reporter caught up with him, Park is hanging with his dance crew, Art of Movement, in North Hollywood, blending in seamlessly with the dancers and extras that have converged at the nondescript banquet hall that has been transformed into a music video set for Far East Movement.

Park's waiting with some members of his crew to film a dance cameo in the electro hip-hop group's "Jello" video, an unexpected perk to the end of his weeklong stay in Los Angeles, which was spurred by his performance at *KoreAm*'s Unforgettable gala.

"This music video shoot is a very last-minute thing. I found out about it yesterday," says Park, obviously pleased with the development. Park knows Far East Movement, whose four members are Asian American, through performing in concerts held by the International Secret Agents, a company founded by FM and Wong Fu Productions to showcase young Asian American talent to an international audience.

Despite his excitement for his cameo, Park is largely withdrawn during the interview, and the boyish smile that made him a fan favorite early in his career is nowhere in sight. Maybe it's the exhaustion from the rigorous schedule he's set for himself in order to get his new album, his first full-length solo work, out to an eagerly waiting public. He shares that he just recorded three songs in the past three days with Rob Knox, an L.A.-based record producer who has worked on music for the likes of T.I., Ciara and Justin Timberlake.

It doesn't help the mood that I've brought up the past, again.

"It happened the way it happened. I don't regret it. Everything happens for a reason," he says when I press him for the reasons behind his stepping down as 2PM's leader, a topic that has led to widespread—sometimes, ugly—speculation. "They're doing well, I'm doing well, the past is the past. Put it to rest."

His controversial departure from 2PM and South Korea in late 2009, after what were perceived as anti-Korean remarks on his MySpace page (such as "Korea is gay") went viral on the Internet, sent shock waves through the nation. The blogosphere blew up, interpreting the comments, which an 18-year-old Park wrote when he first arrived in South Korea in 2005, as the words of someone who hated Koreans. In the public furor that ensued, Park left the country, leaving a note of apology on his record label's website to his fans and group members. Although rumors abounded that Park would likely return to the band once the media scrutiny died down, his record label, JYP Entertainment, announced the following February, to the surprise of many, that Park had confessed to a "severe personal mistake" that killed any chances of him returning to 2PM. Neither he nor his record label have ever elaborated on what that personal transgression was.

While keeping mum about the circumstances surrounding the exit, Park is less inhibited in speaking out against the netizens who unleashed stinging condemnations against Park, including calls for him to commit suicide.

"Anyone can say anything behind a computer screen. People say dumb sh-t all the time. Even I say stupid sh-t on the computer," he says. "[But] I don't bring negativity toward other people. I don't know why people do that."

His earlier MySpace comments were the symptoms of homesickness and difficulties adjusting to the rigorous training regimen set by his record label, he says.

"When I said the stuff I did, I was really young. I was culture shocked," he says. "You know how you say when you get in a fight with your brother, 'I hate you.' It was like that. It was taken out of context definitely. But I was really dumb, and I was immature. That was back then, that was before I understood and before I was an adult."

Born in Seattle, Park spent most of his childhood in the

Washington suburb of Edmonds listening to hip-hop and imitating the Michael Jackson dance moves he saw on TV. He began rapping and dancing in middle school. In high school, Park says he never got good grades, but began making a name for himself in the breakdancing scene. Still, he didn't harbor aspirations to pursue an entertainment career. However, when his mother told Park that a famous Korean music producer, Park Jin-Young, was in Seattle scouting for new talent, she encouraged him to audition. Park tried out on a whim, dancing and performing a rap he had written.

"I didn't even expect anything, I did it, and then I left," he recalls. "I didn't even care about the results. Then they called me back, and then everything just happened."

When offered the opportunity to train with JYP Entertainment, Park, who did not grow up listening to Korean music, grappled with the decision to leave his family and friends in the States for a shot at the unfamiliar, unknown Korean entertainment business.

"It was a big conflict of mine back in the day. I didn't know how to speak Korean. I didn't know anything about Korea. I didn't want to sacrifice my life in Seattle. Everything I'd known, I would just have to give it up—my family, my friends, going to high school there, my prom," he says.

But his mother urged Park to think about his future, so he packed up, boarded the plane to Korea, and took the first steps that would transform the American teen into a Korean pop idol.

Park endured three years of training with JYP Entertainment, the record company founded by Park Jin-Young, before he achieved his pop star status with 2PM. But it took less than a week for Park's MySpace remarks to force his fall from Korean grace. Soon, the young star was on a plane bound for Seattle, leaving behind his stunned group members and disappointed public.

In outrage, his fans took to the Internet, staging silent protests in front of the JYP Entertainment building and organizing flash mobs in countries such as Brazil, Malaysia and France.

Meanwhile, back in his hometown, Park laid low. He notes he wasn't nearly as upset about what happened to him as his family was.





It was the chance to fulfill a longtime dream to work with his [dance] crew, whom he calls family, and the cries of his fans that drew him back to Korea, rather than a desire to make a comeback.

"My family was sad because something bad happened to someone they love. I'm getting a bunch of bad press, people are talking sh-t about me. It kind of hurt me to see them hurt. I didn't really care. People can talk sh-t about me all day. It doesn't matter because they don't really know me. They don't know the real me, they don't know me as a person. But it kind of hurt to see them hurt. But I tried to keep my spirits up."

Explaining that he, 22 at the time, didn't want to spend his family's money, he got a job at a local tire shop. That kind of humble undertaking is perhaps unexpected from a young superstar, but Park talks with sober maturity about the fleeting nature of fame and fortune. "A lot of people, they're really selfish when they get money and they get fame," he says. "But fame and money, it could disappear just like that. So I don't get attached to it."

He also went back to his old love: dancing and participating in battles with his local b-boy crew.

But his sudden dive into relative obscurity was short-lived.

The following spring, Park posted for fun a YouTube video cover of B.o.B.'s "Nothin' On You." The clip shows a white T-shirt-clad Park singing in his bathroom and momentarily flashing his well-documented six-pack abs. In just 24 hours, the video collected more than a million views, eventually reaching 5 million hits and catapulting the singer back onto the radars of music industry executives.

Suddenly, the phones were ringing off the hook.

"I'd always wanted to do [a YouTube cover], and now I had a bunch of time on my hands. So I did it, and it just blew up," Park recalls. "I guess people saw that, 'Wow, a lot of people are paying attention to this kid.' And then all these opportunities, all these windows, they opened up."

The YouTube video proved to record executives the staying power of Park's fan base, says Chris Kim, CEO of in2K-pop.com, a Korean music media portal.

"I think for the most part, Korea is a very criticizing market," says Kim, himself an industry veteran as a former member of Sharp, a popular pop group in Korea during the 1990s and early 2000s. "However, it's not always that hard to make a comeback if you have the fan base."

"[Jay] was able to do that because he has the fan power and following," Kim continues.

Three months after the YouTube video that launched his new solo career, Park returned to South Korea to film a movie with his dance crew, much to the glee of his waiting fans. The movie, *Hype Nation*, pits a Korean b-boy crew, led by Park's character, against a U.S. crew.

It was the chance to fulfill a longtime dream to work with his crew, whom he calls family, and the cries of his fans that drew him back to Korea, rather than a desire to make a comeback, Park says.

"The only reason I went back [to Korea] was because my fans were like, 'We want you back, we want you back,'" he says.

Jason Lee, a longtime record company executive in the U.S. and director of *Hype Nation*, brought on American R&B group B2K, stars of the popular 2004 dance flick *You Got Served*, to play the part of the U.S. breakdancing crew. Lee believes *Hype Nation*, which is still in post-production, can help expose the thriving K-pop industry to American audiences.

After all, the U.S. market is primed and ready for the likes of Park and other talent from Asia, says Lee, adding that a group like Wonder Girls has already helped K-pop make promising inroads into the U.S. market.

"It's a good time—a start for everyone, but it's a very good start. Jay's going to play a major role in this," Lee says.

Park is on a short list of acts poised to cross over successfully into the U.S., along with female hip-hop and pop group 2NE1, fellow Korean American hip-hop artist Tiger JK, and his R&B singer wife, Tasha Reid, who in Korea is known as Yoon Mirae, according to in2K-pop.com's Kim. Far East Movement has already opened the door for Asian Americans in the U.S. mainstream, he says.

"I believe Jay Park will make it. The No. 1 reason Jay can make it is he can speak English," says Kim, who cites the language barrier as a longstanding obstacle to Asian acts making headway with American audiences.

Sitting before me now, Park, who likes to travel with his crew and keep his family close, seems ready to take on the world. The U.S. is one of the markets he has set his sights on, but it's only one of many.

"I want to go to a bunch of countries and do shows. I want to go to countries I've never been to. I want to go to Europe, I want to go to Australia, I want to do shows in Toronto, Canada, the States, L.A., wherever," says Park, his voice picking up speed and excitement.

His new album, which will release in English and Korean, will be the last for a long time in Korea, he vows, as he shifts his focus to developing his international career. Working on the album with Knox allowed the star to first record his songs in English before translating them to Korean.

His latest work will feature the diversity of Park's artistic range, including love songs, club anthems and hardcore hip-hop. Park is hesitant to name a release date, admitting that every time he sets a date, he keeps pushing it back. He's continuing to spread his wings as a songwriter—Park says he wrote 10 of the new tracks so far.

"That's why this album is *One of a Kind*—because I'm not going to put out music again for a long time in Korea," Park says. "After I put this album out, I'm going to work on English stuff, stuff I want to do."

Park says he doesn't hold a grudge against Korea. In fact, he says that he's proud to be Korean and to represent the country when he makes and performs his music: "I don't know what Korea thinks of me. Hopefully it's changed a lot because I'm proud to be Korean. I rep Korea really hard."

He's a wiser, more hardened artist than the kid who took the K-pop world by storm. Going solo has meant managing his own business and learning to recognize the people who were out to "screw" him over.

"I was just a rookie because all this time JYP was handling everything for me, and now I [am] out on my own," he says.

Park is now signed with record label Sidus HQ, but the singer says he's calling the shots, determining his music, schedule and shows.

Although he still feels he has a lot to learn, if anything, the now-solo Park has learned he can make mistakes and rise again.

"Even if you make mistakes, it's not the end of the world," Park says. "There's still other chances, still other roads you can take.

"No matter how big a mistake it is, it's not the end of the world."