Bringing K-Pop to the West

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New York Times March 4, 2012

Patricia Augustin, 19, of Indonesia says she scours the Internet every day for the latest updates on Korean pop music. Paula Lema Aguirre, a high school student from Peru, says she is happiest when she sings Korean songs, especially “It Hurts,” the group 2NE1’s single about teenage love. Neither Ms. Augustin nor Ms. Aguirre is a native Korean speaker, but that did not stop them, along with about 40 other aspiring singers from 16 countries, from making it to the finals in December of the K-Pop World Festival competition in Changwon.

“K-pop is a good icebreaker for foreigners,” said Tara Louise, 19, a singer from Los Angeles. “It gives a lot of affinity for Koreans and the Korean culture.” For South Koreans, the festival, the first of its kind, was confirmation of how widely their country’s latest export has spread, first to Asia and more recently to Europe, the Middle East and the Americas, mainly because of the broad use of social media.

K-pop is part of a broader trend known as the Korean Wave and called “hallyu” in Korean. The Taiwanese were among the first to notice the invasion of Korean soap operas in their television programming in the late 1990s and gave the phenomenon its name. The Korean Wave has long conquered Asia, but before the proliferation of global social networks, attempts by K-pop stars to break into Western markets, including the United States, had largely failed. But now YouTube, Facebook and Twitter make it easier for K-pop bands to reach a wider audience in the West.

When bands like 2NE1, Super Junior and SHINee hold concerts in Europe and the United States, tickets sell out within minutes. K-pop now has its own channel on YouTube, and the videos by bands like Girls’ Generation have topped 60 million views. Girls’ Generation made its American television debut on David Letterman’s “Late Show” in January.

K-pop bands’ style is a fusion of synthesized music, video art, fashionable outfits and teasing sexuality mixed with doe-eyed innocence. K-pop performances have repetitive choruses, often interspersed with English, and synchronized dance routines that have become a fad in Asia.

K-pop’s nascent success in the West stems from lessons the Korean music industry learned from its home market. South Korea is one of the most wired countries in the world, and digital piracy devastated its music scene — sales of CDs by units dropped 70.7 percent from 2000 to 2007, according to the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry, the international music industry association. The Korean music industry regrouped by focusing more on digital distribution and touring. As social networks spread, K-pop bands began to gain more traction in the West.

For example, the R&B singer Jay Park’s songs and albums have hit No. 1 on the R&B/Soul charts on iTunes in the United States, Canada and Denmark since 2010. Thanks to Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, Jay Park is not just an artist but also his own P.R. agent, fan club president and TV network. He is bypassing traditional media gatekeepers locally and gate-crashing his way globally onto overseas charts via social media.

Social media also lend a “dorky cool” factor to these bands, said Marine Vidal, a French journalist and musician who liked Korean pop culture so much that she moved to Seoul last year. After past attempts to emphasize the sex appeal of K-pop stars like BoA and Rain fizzled in the United States, Korean entertainment companies have also learned to market to a more receptive audience — the preadolescents. This year, for example, the Wonder Girls made a TV movie for the TeenNick cable channel in the United States. The Wonder Girls, like other K-pop girl bands, sport short skirts and skin-baring outfits, but their song lyrics stay well within the bounds of chaste romantic love and longing.

Not everyone is convinced K-pop has staying power in the United States. Appearances on Mr. Letterman’s show and Billboard’s K-pop chart have “very little significance here,” said Morgan Carey, a music consultant based in Los Angeles who has worked with Korean pop labels since 2007. Mr. Carey helped propel an obscure Korean reggae artist named Skull to No. 3 on the Billboard R&B singles chart in 2007 by keeping away from Asian-themed events and trying to build his fan base from the United States grass roots, before Skull had to perform his mandatory military service in Korea. Mr. Carey said Korean music labels “ignore the realities of the U.S. market. Bringing recycled American producers and guest artists into the mix long after their relevance in this market has passed” will keep K-pop relegated to a niche market, he said. “The smart move would be to take a huge talent with no brand in Asia and develop them here.”

But even Mr. Carey said he thought some labels were getting smarter about the United States market. He praised the Wonder Girls for getting their TeenNick movie and the singer Rain for his Hollywood roles in the films “Ninja Assassin” and “Speed Racer.” “The way into American pop culture is through fashion and film,” he said.

Yet being savvy with career moves, social media and marketing is not enough — old-fashioned hard work and talent still matter. South Korea’s “star-management” agencies select and train teenage aspiring singers, often housing them together. With the international market in mind, the agencies require trainees to learn a foreign language, and they hire foreign composers and stylists. “It’s manufactured with thorough planning,” said Lee Hark-joon, a director of the South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo’s multimedia team, which followed the girl band Nine Muses for a year to film a documentary on the making of a K-pop group. “They train like androids, banned from dating during their trainee period.”

For Moon Hyun-a and her fellow singers in Nine Muses, managed by Star Empire Entertainment in Seoul, the training began at 1 p.m. each day. Electric music throbbed through a glass-and-steel studio and managers yelled encouragement as the women danced for 10 to 12 hours, seven days a week, for up to four years before the group made its debut in 2010. They practiced synchronized dance routines that were executed precisely — their managers said they should remind fans around the world of the goose-stepping soldiers in North Korea, but with an infectious sense of joy. If a member lags behind or gives up training, a replacement is brought in. Individual members of a group develop their own specialties, some highlighting their adolescent cuteness and others their dancing skills, and have their own fan clubs. But they fiercely compete to become the “leader,” who dances at the head of the formation. “It’s training, training and more training,” said Ms. Moon, 24, who worked as a model and vocalist before joining Nine Muses.

If K-pop fuels the dreams of young South Koreans like Ms. Moon, it also fills a hunger for South Korea as a nation. A global exporting powerhouse, the country had always chafed at its lack of cultural exports that would let the rest of the world know that it was more than a maker of Hyundai cars and Samsung cellphones. Said Andrew Kang, the arts and recording director at Star Empire: “K-pop has become Korea’s killer content.”