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EXCLUSIVE

BIG OCEAN: MEET THE DEAF K-POP GROUP THAT'S BREAKING BARRIERS

Hyunjin, Chanyeon, and Jiseok talk about their remarkable journey and what they want to do next

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NOVEMBER 12, 2024



Big Ocean, from left: Jiseok, Hyunjin, Chanyeon

PARASTAR ENTERTAINMENT*

Few artists debut with a shout-out from the World Health Organization, but Big Ocean isn't your ordinary K-pop group. When they launched their career almost seven months ago on Korea's Day of People with Disabilities, Hyunjin, Chanyeon, and Jiseok made history as the first deaf K-pop group.

On a late evening in Seoul this past weekend, the trio jump onto Zoom. They are at their management company, Parastar Entertainment — which specializes in representing and nurturing artists with disabilities — and are finalizing details before flying to New York to promote their debut EP, *Follow*, out today. Despite the hour, the trio look refreshed and K-pop perfect. Main vocalist Hyunjin wears a white shirt and black

jacket and easily leads the conversation. Wearing a cozy brown-and-white sweater, rapper Chanyeon shares anecdotes and — as fans have pointed out — does resemble heartthrob actor Park Bo-gum. Meanwhile, wearing a snazzy checked jacket over a black turtleneck, the youngest and shyest member, Jiseok, listens intently before sharing his input.

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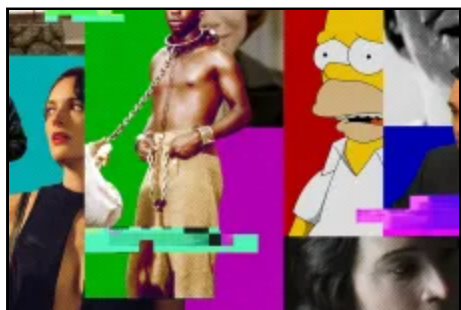
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Knowing that people are curious about how a deaf or hard-of-hearing trio can thrive in the competitive K-pop world, where synchronized dancing and vocal lines are a must, Chanyeon breaks the ice with an anecdote.

“When I first met the boys, I was working as an audiologist in a hospital,” Chanyeon tells *Rolling Stone* in Korean. “I was trying to figure out their hearing level. It was my expertise, so I was curious to know how it compared to mine.”

Chanyeon began to lose his hearing as a tween and had surgery for bilateral cochlear implants. Hyunjin was four years old before he was diagnosed with hearing loss. He has a cochlear implant in his left ear and wears a hearing aid in his right. As for Jiseok, he is the only member who was born deaf and who grew up wearing hearing aids and using Korean Sign Language (KSL) from a young age. His bandmates acknowledge that learning sign language when they were older was challenging.

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“Sign language was the most difficult thing for me to learn,” Chanyeon says. “But with that said, learning a second language has also been fun and rewarding. We sign in KSL, American Sign Language (ASL), and International Sign Language (ISL) so that we can communicate with as many PADO as possible.”

As with all K-pop groups, Big Ocean’s fandom has a special name: PADO. In Korean, 파도 translates to wave. Just as waves are created by energy passing through water, PADO is what drives the group to excel, no matter how tired they are.

And their days are often grueling. Their practices are long and include working with vocal coaches, choreographers, and sign language experts to ensure that there is no ambiguity in what they are singing and signing. They wear smartwatches with metronomes, use AI voice technology, utilize flashing lights to cue their positions, and a multitude of other things that most K-pop idols don’t have to worry about.

“People say that we are talented or have a gift and that is nice to hear,” says Hyunjin, who spoke entirely in English during this interview. “But I think that any achievements we made are due to maybe 1 percent talent and 99 percent effort. We work really hard.”

Prior to forming Big Ocean, Hyunjin was set to use his engineering degree to work in cybersecurity. Chanyeon was already working as an audiologist. And Jiseok was racing competitively as a downhill skier. I ask them, wouldn't it have been easier to follow those career paths instead of K-pop?

They all laugh and collectively offer variations of, "But where's the fun in that?"

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Jiseok says that when he was a student at Seoul Samsung School, BTS leader RM made a generous donation to the school's music program in

2019. It was the first time that he learned about music and K-pop choreography.

“At that time, I knew that I wanted to become like RM *sunbaenim*,” Jiseok says, using honorifics to show respect to the famous rapper. “I wanted to be able to donate to schools so that other students could benefit from music lessons like I did from RM.”

Fulfilling his childhood wish, Big Ocean made a donation to Jiseok’s alma mater in September. But before that, their fandom donated money to Gallaudet University, the Washington, D.C. college for deaf students, to honor Big Ocean’s 100-day anniversary. This donation was deliberately timed. In Korean culture, a baby’s first 100 days of life are celebrated with a lavish party to honor its survival. This was their fans’ way of congratulating Big Ocean for surviving and thriving in the competitive K-pop world.

Follow includes three singles released earlier this year (“Glow,” “Blow,” and “Slow”) along with their pitch-perfect new single “Flow,” which is sung in English. The group was intentional in the order of songs that they released and how they wanted to present their optimistic messages.

“We are very excited about *Follow*,” Hyunjin says. “The album is about following your dreams and happiness, and each track has a meaning we wanted to share. We want people to ‘Glow’ with hope, ‘Blow’ through challenges, ‘Slow’ down their pace, and ‘Flow’ naturally.”

Their messages beautifully tie together not only in the music, but also with the accompanying videos, which include intricate choreography with Korean and American sign language built into their dance moves. For “Flow,” they chose to highlight the National Institute for Deaf Youth in Paris by filming at the school’s campus. They also utilized International Sign Language for the first time in their music video. And even during this interview, Chanyeon and Jiseok subtly use sign language to punctuate Hyunjin’s quotes. Though they say they don’t think they’re at a place where they are role models, they also acknowledge that it’s an honor to be considered that way.

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“I find Big Ocean extraordinary in what is being asked of them,” social worker Joy Lieberthal Rho, LCSW, tells *Rolling Stone*. “They speak beautifully and articulately for the hearing world in Korean and in English. ... In the United States, the concept of deaf culture is important. The deaf community has created and advocated for a world of their own. In South Korea, where Koreanness is a homogeneous concept, Big Ocean is challenging what it means to be Korean. The members are inviting Koreans into their world, their culture ... and I think that is a

beautiful thing. I am so excited that the music world in Korea has chosen to amplify Big Ocean as artists and people to respect.”

Big Ocean’s music is also reaching people like Tallahassee-based teacher Heather Carson, whose nine-year-old son is deaf. When friends and family members sent them links to articles about the trio, the family went down the Big Ocean rabbit hole.

“I was so excited to be able to share them with my son,” Carson says. “We have watched a lot of their YouTube videos together, and I just love that there is a group of musicians that the deaf community can see themselves represented in. Representation is so important. They’re making music and they happen to have hearing loss. And that’s one thing I’ve really tried to get across to my son. Yes, you are deaf. But you can do anything just like anyone else, whether you happen to have a disability or not.”

Carson’s son, C., adds, “My mom showed me their videos and they were singing and dancing and I was like, ‘Whoa. They sound good!’ And then I was like, ‘How do they dance like that?’ It was cool to know they are just like me and they can do that.”

In the near future, Big Ocean would like to expand their group. When they were working towards debuting, they were part of a trainee group that included four other young men, who eventually dropped out. Hyunjin says he likes the idea of having a larger group, so that there would be more energy onstage. Jiseok adds that they’re open to including foreign members. And they all agree when Chanyeon says any future members should also be hard of hearing.

“From my perspective, our team was formed for a reason,” Hyunjin says. “Our goal is to break barriers and push ourselves to the limit. Since we all have hearing disabilities, I think it makes sense that new members do, too.”

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Chanyeon nods, adding, “It was so nice watching the K-drama *Twinkling Watermelon* and see that the actors all were using very good facial expressions and that their level of sign language was very good. I felt like I needed to improve my own skills!”

Thinking it over, Hyunjin says, “The film *CODA* was so impressive, too. Right now, there are some shows and films where you see disabled and non-disabled people using sign language in daily life on screen. But that’s not something we see in our normal daily lives. Media representation is so important. By existing as Big Ocean and producing good music, I hope that the general public will have interest in learning sign language and being more open to people with disabilities.”

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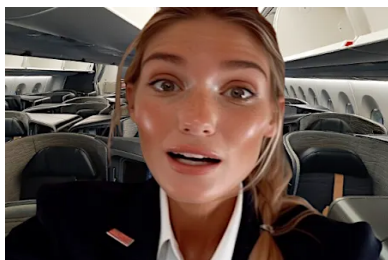
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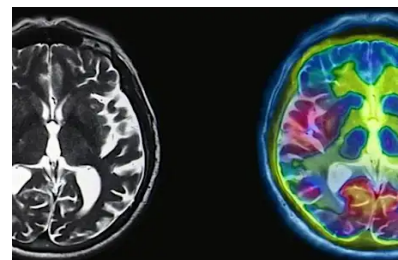
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