

Kiss Me

By

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Jaeseop Kim must be having a so-so hair day — his head is hidden under a rakishly tilted newspaper boy’s cap. He sits at a sleek silver table on the quiet upper levels of Lerner Hall, sipping a bubble tea from Lerner’s Café East. He wears paint-splattered jeans and a plaid sweater peeking out from under a denim jacket.

“This is dandy style,” he explains in a slightly British-accented voice. He has a quiet manner, but it’s hard to say how much of this guardedness is his natural personality and how much has been learned over years of being interviewed.

Kim is a member of an “idol group,” what Koreans call pop boy bands and girl groups. His seven-member group, [U-KISS](#) (Ubiquitous Korean International Idol Super Star) is fresh off a three-city US tour and media blitz that included *Good Morning America* and the *New York Post*. U-KISS has sold a quarter of a million albums and singles worldwide. Kim, at twenty-two, is an international pop star.

The U-KISS style and sound fall under the rubric of K-pop, the term for South Korean pop music, which was briefly brought into the American mainstream with Psy’s 2012 hit single “Gangnam Style.” Psy is a solo artist, but K-pop is better known for its large, carefully groomed idol groups.

Kim, who goes by the stage name AJ, describes what the world audience expects from K-pop: “synchronized idol groups singing and dancing.” A typical U-KISS video is heavy on flashing lights, matching clothes — tight pants, plenty of bling, color-coordinated suits — and lingering close-ups.

It’s a mix that captivates teenage girls from many countries, most of whom got their first glimpses of U-KISS on YouTube. Since forming in 2008, U-KISS has traveled around Asia, Europe, and South America, performing its mix of hip-hop, pop, dance,

and R&B for thousands of adoring fans. A U-KISS fan is known as a Kiss Me. When the Kiss Mes can't see U-KISS in the flesh, they congregate online, sharing gossip and opinions on Tumblr and Facebook and retweeting and favoriting on Twitter, where AJ has almost two hundred thousand followers.

To be able to flawlessly execute the synchronized dancing and singing that thrill the Kiss Me crowd, Kim and his bandmates spend hours upon hours rehearsing before tours. Much of their young lives have already been spent nailing down moves and memorizing lyrics. Kim quit school in the seventh grade to devote himself fulltime to his first idol band, Paran, for which he auditioned at the suggestion of his sister. She thought he had the look, even though he'd never sung or danced.

While training and touring with Paran, Kim wanted to keep up with his education, so he hired tutors. Still, it was hard to find time to study. Finding any time alone is difficult in a band. Bandmates share plane rides and hotel rooms, and spend every meal together. "I always have to be with the six members. But all people have certain moments when they want to be alone." Then there are the temptations of the rock-star life. "If you want to get a lot of girls, you can, of course; if you want a fast life, yes, you can. But I'm not really that outgoing. I'm not choosing that life."

While negotiating his contract with U-KISS, which he joined in 2011, Kim insisted that the management company let him pursue college. Drawn to Columbia for its reputation and location, Kim was admitted to the School of General Studies in 2012. He's had to take time off to fulfill his U-KISS obligations, and hopes to graduate in 2020.

He keeps music in his life during school by composing and writing lyrics, often inspired by favorite artists like Pharrell Williams and Timbaland. He's especially interested in freestyle hip-hop, which is largely outside the purview of U-KISS. He intends to major in psychology, which he sees as a springboard to a different sort of future.

"When I am in my thirties, I want to do my own business, based on culture," he says. "I want to make cultural content that can easily touch people's minds — music, movies, whatever people are fond of." His ultimate goal is to be a minister in the South Korean ministry of culture, which oversees the National Museum, the National Theater, and Korean cultural centers around the world.

Kim often chooses not to share his U-KISS identity with his classmates, wary that they'll treat him differently. When people know about U-KISS, he says, "It feels like they watch how they act in front of me."

Their potential reactions are just one more thing to manage in his careful balancing act of two lives, pop star and student. Kim gets it done, sometimes with big moves like taking semesters off to go on tour, and sometimes by taking care of the details, like his hair. It's naturally curly, but he straightens it for U-KISS and prefers it that way. Not a problem when he has easy access to the U-KISS hair stylist, which he doesn't while at school. But Kim came up with a solution. "Before I got here, I got a haircut, really short, like a military hair style, in order to focus on studying."

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