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### What is Asian America in the Music Industry?

Asian Americans and music have a long history of shaping one another. The beginnings of Asian American involvement in popular music as well as the stories of current breakthrough artists emphasize the effect of American ideals on this section of the music industry as well as traditional music's existence in the United States. By looking into a widespread collection of Asian American musical artists' stories, a vivid pattern of defiance against racializations emerges to confront the common conception of otherness and using their intersectionality to upend the matrix of domination that many of these artists face.

Through studying women in music in the 1960s and now, not many similarities can be found from what they wore to the content expected of them. The Kim sisters from Korea were the first Asian group to enter the American spotlight after performing for GIs stationed near their hometown. The last surviving member of the trio is Sue Kim Bonifazio who recounted her journey on Ken Fong's Asian America Podcast. Although she definitely did not grow up Asian American according to standards today, she was constantly surrounded by American influences and started memorizing American songs to perform since she was a young teen. The stationed soldiers often showed her and her sisters pictures of their cars and such belongings that led her family to believe America was a land of the rich. Sue Kim's casual, first hand narrative of her position in the spotlight in Las Vegas contrasts significantly with Storrs' research oriented

account of the time period in which her mother, Yoshiko Nabeoka, wed an American GI. Racism may not have been as obvious from Sue Kim's point of view; even with their intersectionalities defining them as multiply oppressed, it was due to the Kim sisters' novel status as a non white musical group and their focus on succeeding that they didn't come face-to-face with much opposition, but a holistic look at the historical conditions immigrant women faced shows that the Kim sisters were an exception. Simply singing American songs and being multi talented made a marked increase in the level of acceptance by local residents for the Kim sisters. For women that could not assimilate so easily, like Nabeoka, life was plagued with racism from strangers and in laws but with no platform or representation to fight against this oppression.

It is not until recently that Asian Americans have risen to the levels of their peers in the music industry, but activism has remained an integral goal of most Asian artists since the beginning. Son of Paper, Kyle Jae Shin, is a rapper with Korean and Chinese roots, he himself being a fourth generation Asian American. On Ken Fong's podcast episode with him, Shin explains how that part of his intersectionality causes him to distance himself from the stereotypical 'fresh off the boat' identity that Asian Americans are given, regardless of long histories in the United States. This is a reflection of the separation within the Asian American community similar to how 9 man volleyball members perpetuate a stereotype of what an Asian man is and how their personal, masculine attributes make them belong outside that category. Shin's current values include being true to himself in his work, not changing to fit what people think a rapper should be, nor changing to be more Asian American. This type of change is seen when Asian men are forced into a stereotype of hyper feminization in their social spheres and have to balance out accordingly by being hypermasculine in the private spheres they control. As

Ken Fong mentioned in this episode, ways to appear more masculine is to be a perpetrator of violence, especially against females, which is often seen in the media. These are the types of stereotypes that many artists, including Shin, fight against through their lyrics and actions actively pointing out these harmful racializations to heighten awareness of a problem that is often subconscious.

Another example of this is Asian Americans in the indie scene; the premise of indie music is acting outside of determined societal roles. Even with this background, the majority of indie music is dominated by white artists that choose to revive music from marginalized groups in an effort to experience symbolic marginalization through such music. This is why, in Isul Kim's music, the lyrics "When you look into my eyes / do you see a slant or do you really look inside?" show her understanding of how Asian American musicians are viewed, by their physical characteristics (their body), and how that affects how their talent is viewed. This racialization of Asian American talent is evident in Kim's experiences going on stage and seeing visible surprise that an Asian American artist would be performing. Being an Asian American female in the performing arts, her different identities intersect to create a complex intersectionality that lends itself to aspects of her unique music, but many parts of her intersectionality are oppressed which also combine to place her under the matrix of domination. Because of this, Kim's lyrics express her desire for listeners to be colorblind when determining her value as an artist (Ishii 220). Her intersectionality is further individualized when her educational background is considered; she attended an Ivy League school but makes money "outside of [the] extant cultural hierarchy" of salaried capitalism. This is her experience in countering the model minority myth is also what labels her as indie because it is her active countering of her "expected payoffs of her education"

matches the definition of indie to reject societal calls for conformity or falling into a set category, something that is happening, but not always called indie, as racialized views of non whites are being pushed back against. In other history of Asian American music, James Shigeta was an interesting case that likely represented much of Asian American attempts to break into the popular music industry. His first album CD cover in the late 1950s had added notes of his 'Americanness' by stating his college-level education and time in the US Marine Corps (Wang 445). While his college education was a selling point, this point also serves to further distance the current Asian American situation, as shown in Isul Kim's rejection of her Harvard education. This altered way of advertising music proves that, Shigeta being a naturalized citizen born in Hawaii, Asian Americans originally strived to assimilate and now are generally moving in the opposite direction, away from what is expected of them.

Although it is easy to identify the relationship between more mainstream Asian American music, such as rap, with American society, there are subtler influences of the same societal ideals on traditional Asian music such as in the evolution of taiko drumming groups in the United States. While indie music and Asian American involvement both push back against societal norms designated for Asian Americans, the taiko group Soh Daiko both embraces its deep cultural roots and conforms to societal norms just as inclusivity and equality. These characteristics are shown by a lack of hierarchy within the group that is common among other taiko organizations and inclusion in contrast to traditional taiko being only for the very fit. This deviation from the standard shaping of taiko groups is a direct influence from the culture surrounding this New York City based group in comparison to groups founded by Sensei Tanaka from Japan, located in San Francisco that still carry strict hierarchy and limited membership.

This exemplifies how Asian Americans, or Asian American organizations, will often change and even begin to think in accordance to racialized societal standards and that is part of how these false representations have been allowed to continue for so long. As Wang argues in *Between the Notes*, the umbrella Asian American identity is created by both external and internal forces, and music is an example of an internal creative force that is shaping Asian American identity and perception. Throughout the history of Asian Americans being in the United States, music has been used “not through its capacity for exactitude of meaning but through its capacity for ambiguity, for harboring a multitude of possible meanings” (Wang 442). As we read in Carol Fan’s article and watched in PBS’s documentary about Asian women in Hawaii, music was an integral part of their everyday life as well as a recorder of history; the same songs would be tweaked to fit the truths of different women. This same occurrence is important to modern Asian American artists and how they choose to represent themselves away from stereotypes in their music.

The musical history of Asian Americans in the United States recorded this group’s struggle to assimilate and rid themselves of the ‘perpetual foreigner’ label and the following separation from societal standards. Modern artists like Kyle Jae Shin and Isul Kim define what it means to have ‘Asian American’ as a part of their intersectionality through their music while previous artists like James Shigeta and the Kim Sisters show how their journey was instead aimed towards societal acceptance. Throughout this history, Asian America has become redefined as a group in which much diversity exists and not one racialization applies to it as a whole.

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