

## More than a Song: APIA Singers

### Preface

Joyce D. Bantugan

Throughout history, many social justice movements and singers have used music to invite, unify, and shape a broader audience's social and political consciousness. This can be found within the many protest songs during the Civil Rights and the anti-Vietnam War movements, to name a few. Decades later, we see a shift in the American entertainment industry with an increasing popularity of Asian American pop culture and social justice awareness. And, like many artists of color, artists of Asian descent have struggled to secure a space within the American mainstream music industry. Despite the many barriers they have encountered, including racism, discrimination, pigeonholing, a lack of representation, and some lack of familial support, many Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) singers have managed to overcome and break into the industry.

First and foremost, it is essential to distinguish the different identities between APIAs and Asian singers. APIAs are individuals who were either born as or became naturalized United States citizens. Asians are born in an Asian country, not in the United States, and are citizens of that Asian country. This activity book discusses API AMERICAN singers, a minority struggling in a predominantly white mainstream music industry.

As mentioned above, social justice and music have been intertwined from the pre-1990s to the present. In 1973, the Yellow Pearl produced the first Asian American music album, *A Grain of Sand*, full of songs of protest that showcased their perspectives on social issues of that time. In the 1980s, The Jets participated in the "Just Say No" campaign to discourage children from taking drugs. In 2020, Keshi joined 88Rising's "Asia Rising Forever" online music festival to fundraise for Asian Americans Advancing Justice. In addition to working alongside various civil rights organizations, many artists have written music that addressed various sociopolitical issues – for example, Anderson .Paak's music addresses police brutality, civil unrest, unemployment, and the pandemic claiming the lives of minorities, and Ruby Ibarra's music speaks out about colorism. Overall, what all of our Wall of Fame APIA singers have in common is how their music and presence have challenged the predominately white mainstream American music industry, which is notoriously impenetrable.

Unfortunately, some APIA singers cannot penetrate the American music industry. Instead, some have moved abroad to pursue their careers. While their English-speaking abilities and Western influence are desirable traits for catering to a rising international market, APIA artists still encounter issues in Asia, such as difficulty learning the Asian language. And though there were successful APIA singers who achieved international fame – e.g., f(x)'s Amber Liu, Girls Generation's Tiffany Young, Jay Park, and Leehom Wang – it is unlikely they would have achieved the same level of international fame as they have abroad. This is due to strong anti-Asian sentiments in the United States, the rise of sharing social media platforms like Tik Tok, and the different approaches Asian companies incorporate to ensure success, e.g., collaborating with other non-Asian artists and developing fanbases abroad. It was not until the 2000s that a wave of Korean pop culture started to spread steadily in popularity in the United States. Once the 2010s hit, songs like "Gangnam Style" by PSY and the K-pop group BTS emerged. And with the influence of social media, we began to see a spread of Asian music. As a result, the pop

music market in Asia grew into a multibillion-dollar industry that offered more opportunities for work and exposure, which appealed to new artists.

Despite K-pop's success and breakthrough in the American music industry, it does not necessarily aid in the success of Asian American artists, especially for those who do not "look" like what many consider Asian – namely those who are Asian Indian or mixed-race. Artists like Bruno Mars, Tyga, and Anderson .Paak have Asian heritage but are not typically referred to as Asian American artists. As a result, many up and coming APIA singers have discussed in interviews that they did not have an APIA role model and desired to become an example. Reasons for this lack of representation stem from Asian Americans remaining trapped within anti-Asian sentiments, cultural definitions of success, the perpetual foreigner syndrome, and a model minority myth that continues to stereotype the APIA community. These perceptions pigeonhole APIAs and lead to underrepresentation in all media, including music. As a result, breaking into the music industry continues to be an ongoing struggle unique to APIAs in the United States.

Like any aspect of the music industry, there is no guaranteed path to finding fame and success. Hard work, persistence, dedication, and community support are crucial to finding some form of success. Unfortunately, many barriers still exist within the industry that prevent the rise of more APIA singers. We are slowly progressing with the changing landscape of the American media industry. For those APIA singers fortunate in breaking past those barriers, they are gradually working towards disrupting the industry's norms and are outspoken, in their words and actions, and on their identity and stance on various sociopolitical issues. Their lyrics and actions are truly "**more than a song.**"

The Asian American Studies students at SF State University have put together the APIA Singers Wall of Fame in 2024 to honor some of the past and present APIA singers who are "more than a song." On April 28, 2024, the APIA Biography Project kicks off our 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Asian Pacific Islander American Heritage Month Celebration at the San Francisco Main Public Library. Then for the entire month of May 2024, with the full collaboration of the San Francisco Main Public Library, our annual APIA Wall of Fame is displayed at the Children's Center with a separate display at the Chinese Center showing how Square and Circle Club used music to serve the community. In addition to these events, the APIA website ([apiabiography.sfsu.edu](http://apiabiography.sfsu.edu)) features activities and a variety of resources. This year's cosponsoring community partners include the San Francisco Main Public Library (SFPL), The Association of Chinese Teachers (TACT), and the Square and Circle Club (S&C).

**2023-24 APIA BIOGRAPHY PROJECT PLANNING COMMITTEE**

Lorraine Dong and Jeannie Woo (SFSU; Square and Circle Club), Directors

Nolan-Kyle Sumala (Square and Circle Club), Website Manager

Jerry Dear (SF Main Public Library, Magazines and Newspapers Center Librarian)

Anita Wu (TACT Curriculum Committee)

Joyce D. Bantugan (Square and Circle Club), Social Media Manager

Emily Salcido (Square and Circle Club)

Becky Mou (SFSU)

Kai Headley, SFSU Student Assistant; Square and Circle Club Intern

Maxwell Quan (George Washington High School), SFSU Student Intern