

South Korean boyband BTS's new album, Map of the Soul: Persona, is released with an immense weight of expectation

The album by the septet turns out to be a slight but genre-fluid affair



BTS are said to earn \$3.6bn annually for the Korean economy © Jeff Kravitz/FilmMagic

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BTS are a bit like Eric Cantona, the French import who transformed English football in the 1990s with his unpredictable play and his penchant for riddling philosophical observations about seagulls and trawlers.

The South Korean septet have done something similar to the Anglo-American world of the boyband. The group's members consist of three rappers (RM, Suga, J-Hope) and four singers (Jin, Jimin, V, Jungkook). Each has his own elaborate fictional back story, a fantasy world in which illness, suicide, abandonment and dead or vile parents play a prominent role. In

comparison, the traditional division of identities in British and American boybands into the “quiet one”, the “naughty one” and the “sexy one” seems as crude as hoofing the ball upfield.

Their new album *Map of the Soul: Persona* (released on Big Hit Entertainment) combines the titles of a book by Carl Jung and a film by Ingmar Bergman. It opens with a dilemma never broached by the likes of *New Kids on the Block* or *Take That*. “Who am I?” the band’s leader RM raps in Korean: “The question I had my whole life, the question I probably won’t find an answer to my whole life.”

RM, whose real name is Kim Nam-joon, is the group’s chief conceptualist, a former member of South Korea’s underground hip-hop scene. BTS were designed around him by the veteran K-pop impresario Bang Si-hyuk in 2013. Despite being manufactured, they were granted more autonomy to develop than other K-pop acts.

Their imaginary back stories, told through songs and videos, have proved a formidably effective device, fuelling the obsessions of their following, the BTS Army. According to the Guinness Book of World Records, they hold the record for the most Twitter engagements, with an average 330,624 responses to their tweets. Their 2018 album *Love Yourself: Tear* was the first by a K-pop act to top the US charts; a show at London’s Wembley Stadium later this year sold out in 90 minutes. It has been calculated that they generate \$3.6bn annually for the Korean economy.

With an immense weight of anticipation surrounding it, *Map of the Soul: Persona* materialised with a digital ta-da on streaming platforms globally at 9am GMT today. Rather anticlimactically, it turns out only to be seven tracks long.

“Intro: Persona”, in which RM shares his existential worries, is in the enjoyably old-school rap of the band’s early songs — so old-school, in fact, that it channels the swaggering riffs and head-nodding beats of a Rick Rubin cut from the 1980s.

“Boy With Luv”, an engaging dance-pop number with US singer Halsey, finds the band’s singers coming to the fore, softer and more boyish-sounding than the rappers. “Mikrokosmos” is a big pop number with EDM flavourings in which love is imagined as a cosmos of shining stars, a celestial rather than sexual state of attraction.

“Home” tries to get physical with a come-hither R&B routine in which Spanish words are added to the Korean and English compote: the results are thin and synthetic. Invariably shown looking sad or pained in their imagery — boys to look after as much as lust after — BTS find a surer footing on “Make It Right”, featuring Ed Sheeran, an atmospheric number shot through with the haunting strains of a melancholy synthesiser melody.

“Dionysus” brings this abbreviated but genre-fluid album to an end with a pullulating party tune, which loops back to the rap style of the first song, as though providing an escapist response to RM’s philosophising about who he is. Although *Map of the Soul: Persona* is not capable of providing an answer to the meaning of life — contrary to the wilder expectations of fans — it does demonstrate the qualities that have seen BTS raise the boyband game to new levels.