

Rise of the Sun

As South Korean hip-hop and R&B gain momentum, artists like **Taeyang** are flourishing not just locally but internationally. Arthur Tam speaks to the 'Prince of R&B' about his first world tour and his take on cultural appropriation

Since Psy's infectious *Gangnam Style* took the world by storm in 2012, Korean music has been on the rise. In recent years a plethora of South Korean acts have crept up the charts in the USA, Europe, across Asia and, of course, in Hong Kong. In 2015 K-pop's biggest sensation is certain to be Taeyang. His combination of great hair, good looks and talent is set to help him make 2015 his own, not only in his native country but also across the globe.

Dong Young-hae – better known as Taeyang, meaning 'sun', or occasionally called Sol – has broken out from his role as a boy band stalwart to become a solo artist sensation over the past couple of years. The 26-year-old has been mostly known and celebrated as a dynamic member of smash hit quintet Big Bang, alongside members TOP, G-Dragon, Seungri and Daesung. Unlike so many other homogenous Korean pop groups, Big Bang have legitimate swag and produce music that's imaginative, modern and more internationally palatable than their peers. They combine a revved-up mix of hip-hop, trap, R&B and dance, and turn it into something that's intriguing and edgy. Their success is also largely down to their record label, YG Family, one of the big three labels in South Korea. YG Family has chosen to devote its efforts towards

popularising hip-hop and R&B in the country and selects artists like Taeyang that fit this philosophy. Taeyang joined YG Family at the tender age of 12 and, after six years of training, debuted with his bandmates in 2006. Since then, he's released two studio length albums and six EPs with Big Bang, plus two solo albums, and he's now preparing for his first solo world tour, *Rise*, with Hong Kong as his first stop on January 10. Taeyang has the full package to go solo. He's got moves like Chris Brown, smooth vocals like Miguel and a tight, rock-hard body that he's not at all shy to show off on stage. Just Google 'Taeyang grind on me' and thank us later. He also sports a wicked style that's been highlighted in the press during fashion weeks, as well as captivating tattoos on his body. There's something rebellious, fresh and sexy about Taeyang's

persona, even though he would be quick to deny that he's any sort of 'bad boy'. So, 2014 was undeniably a good year for Taeyang, who won best male vocalist, Best Male Artist and Best Song of the Year with his single *Eyes, Nose and Lips* at the Mnet Asian Music Awards hosted in Hong Kong. That song alone has more than 30 million hits on YouTube and his second album, *Rise*, that his forthcoming world tour is named after, has become the highest charting Korean solo artist album on the US Billboard in history. It's easy to see why, then, Taeyang has been dubbed the 'Prince of R&B'. He's got the stats and the pedigree to back it up. Ahead of his Hong Kong concert, *Time Out* sits down with the rising star for an exclusive one-on-one interview to talk about Taeyang's career, the authenticity of Korean

hip-hop and how his record label differs from all the others in the industry... **It must be exciting to have your first solo tour, Taeyang. Why did you choose Hong Kong as your first stop?** While I was doing the show in Korea and Japan, the response was quite good. So my music company decided that it would be a good idea to have a world tour – and that Hong Kong would be a good first stop. **How has your music evolved over the years?** Quite some time has passed since I began in the industry. My love for music hasn't changed at all during this time. I have remained the same but what has changed is the environment and how people perceive me. The biggest change has been my popularity. ▶



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If you could collaborate with one artist, living or dead, who would it be?

Actually, it's very hard for me to say who exactly I would collaborate with, living or dead.

But if there's a chance for a collaboration, the most important thing is timing and a mutual appreciation for each other's music. If you have that, it wouldn't matter who you make music with because something beautiful would ultimately come about.

There are people who criticise the appropriation of black culture, aka hip-hop, for not being authentic. What are your thoughts on this?

Actually, I don't think the question is really about authenticity. It's clear the cultural performances of hip-hop vary from place to place. Obviously there are a lot of outside influences to Korean hip-hop but at the same time there are unique elements in Korean hip-hop. The culture of hip-hop obviously comes from the States. It really isn't about who's right and who's wrong because there's no right and wrong when it comes to music. Every country is going to have its own way of performing a certain genre of music. Hip-hop is a genre that's inspired a lot by personal experiences and Korean hip-hop is authentic in itself because we have our own unique experience, even though it can be inspired by somewhere else. We do our own thing and when people start to like what they see, it grows and begins a new type of culture. Comparing Korean hip-hop and American hip-hop is a bit of an old-fashioned way to frame the discussion. It's more important to perhaps consider how people have been able to truly enjoy the adaption of hip-hop.

You previously said that now is the time for Korean music to push hard internationally – however, there are music agencies that are too involved in making money and using their artists as tools rather than really caring about the music. How does your music label differ?

That's a really good question. My company doesn't use its artists. Before this world tour our CEO asked me 'are you doing this for

the money? Or are you doing this to put on a good performance for your fans?' My response is obviously for the fans. Other agencies, though, they send their idols to take on as many jobs as possible, in quite an unhealthy fashion. My company is absolutely not like that. I know there's room for these unhealthy practices within the industry to change and I hope they do.

What has been the your biggest challenge in your career?

There are a lot of things in different aspects of my career that have proven to be a challenge. It's hard to think of a specific thing though. I just roll with the punches and appreciate the experience.

Has there been any intention to make a debut in the US like South Korean female sensation of 2NE1 fame, CL?

I don't have any specific intentions of taking my music to any particular place. The most important thing is picking out the right type of music to match the time and the place that I'm performing at. I'm just going to try really hard on my own music and maybe it'll only work in Korea or maybe it will go global. It depends. All I know is that I have to focus on what's at hand, do it well and execute my performances well with Big Bang too.

What would you like to achieve with your solo show?

Well, I want to appreciate the music first and foremost but also the whole feel of the show. I personally added input on how the set should be designed and how the lighting and everything should be laid out as well as the visuals. I think the fans are going to perhaps see more of what I am about with this show.

Are you satisfied with your career so far?

As an artist, I wouldn't say I can ever be satisfied. I have to keep improving as I go forward and that's how it has to be until my dying day. That would be ideal. Saying I'm satisfied would just be too cheesy. ■

Rise: 2015 Taeyang World Tour Asia World-Expo, Sat Jan 10. Tickets: \$780-\$1,480; hkticketing.com.