

Koreans Got Talent: Auditioning for U.S. Army Gigs in Korea

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Abstract

K-pop's talent factories and the popularity of televised pop music auditions have placed Korea's contemporary auditioning processes in the spotlight. But under what conditions did auditions take place in the past, and on the basis of what criteria? This study investigates the ways in which aspiring pop music talents auditioned in the 1950s, when many of Korea's veteran pop music celebrities were first discovered. A site of transcultural negotiation and compromise, the auditions organized during and after the Korean War by the Eighth United States Army in Korea were part of an operation that sought to meet a wide range of criteria for music entertainment. Like those applied by Korean talent factories today, those criteria comprised far more than mere musical talent.

Keywords: auditions, 1950s, Korean War, talent shows, USO shows, military entertainment, EUSAK, Special Services

Introduction

In recent years, reality pop music talent shows have become the staple of Korea's primetime television with one or two major television networks airing a variation on the format each week.¹ As elsewhere, the shows commonly entail the public auditioning by amateurs in front of a small panel of judges who whilst theatrical in their response are amenable to the feedback of the viewers and live audience.² In addition to promoting the realm of Korean popular culture, the shows highlight the desirability of neoliberalism.³ Their popularity derives in part from the image of the pop music industry having developed into an undemocratic juggernaut that denies opportunities to raw talents from the working or lower middle classes.⁴ In Korea, this notion has a long history,⁵ but it is probably compounded by the K-pop idol industry, which is run by talent agencies that specialize in creating as opposed to discovering future stars. K-pop recruits are required to fully dedicate themselves to their training, often for years, before they have a slim chance of landing a competitive contract. They have little input in the creative processes and must closely follow a carefully prescribed pattern of behavior.⁶ Criticism of these practices is likely to have contributed to the rise of reality talent shows in Korea.⁷

But what criteria were applied to aspiring entertainers auditioning for a regular gig in previous decades? Were those with raw talent able to rely on their artistic merits, or were other qualities required of them too? In order to answer these questions, one has to go back to the early 1950s, when the Eighth United States Army in Korea (EUSAK) began organizing auditions for aspiring entertainers. Because they had a profound influence on the development of popular music in South Korea throughout the ensuing decades, as well as on the local perception of American culture, scholars have begun to examine how military entertainment was organized. U.S. Army reports and interviews with Korean entertainers shed light on the transnational, transcultural conditions and criteria for performing on camp shows. Considering that the popularity of today's talent shows amounts to a call for more opportunities for aspiring entertainers, I examine these materials to determine whether the arrangement of U.S. Army entertainment during

and after the Korean War indeed began to turn a deaf ear to raw music talent.

Calls for Recruitment

The first major concerts in Korea, featuring Al Jolson, took place from 17 to 22 September 1950, a few months after the outbreak of the Korean War. In spring 1951, EUSAK's Special Services section reached an agreement with the American United Service Organization Inc. (USO) to jointly organize indoor and outdoor events at military camps throughout Korea.⁸ Known locally as *mip'algun syo* (EUSAK shows), these included performances by American civilian entertainment troupes, as well as by celebrities, including Bob Hope, Mickey Rooney, Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield, and Debbie Reynolds. Although shows featuring major stars such as these were very popular, drawing crowds of up to ten thousand men, most entertainment was provided by unknown civilian troupes, sometimes in the form of a variety show. The first of these, Camp Show #975, which toured from 22 May to 11 June 1951, consisted of 5 male and 3 female entertainers who performed music, dance, magic, and comedy for the duration of one hour and twenty minutes.⁹ Smaller shows like this still often drew audiences of several hundred men. In addition to the celebrity events and U.S. civilian entertainment, the army organized Special Services Platoons, which were semi-professional performing units comprised of military personnel.¹⁰ Other entertainment organized by the army included Korean traditional music performances, quiz, movie and theatre nights, crafts workshops, boxing matches, magic shows, and radio shows.¹¹

Pop concerts sometimes comprised jazz and big band music, including all-girl swing bands,¹² but the majority of live music entertainment was white, both in terms of the musicians and their repertoire, with country and western music dominating.¹³ In spite of President Truman's issue of Executive Order 9981 on 26 July 1948, which officially abolished all racial discrimination in the US Armed Forces, forms of segregation would persist for many years. While Special Services reports frequently identified white band members, shows by

Koreans or African-Americans were usually anonymous, even when they featured a noted soloist. A declassified letter dated 1 October 1951, for example, offered EUSAK the opportunity to host a “six piece negro band [...] including an outstanding Negro female singer.”¹⁴

The shows organized by the USO constituted only part of the live entertainment for U.S. military (*migun mudae*), which comprised both camp shows and clubs. During the military conflict, which ended with a ceasefire in 1953, there are said to have been 126 live stages producing a combined total of some 5,400 United States military shows.¹⁵ In the years that followed, the number of shows grew steadily. While troops stationed in outposts were provided very little if any live entertainment, those located in the cities of Seoul, Taegu, Pusan, P’yŏngt’aek, Tongduch’ŏn and Munsan could often choose from a range of live shows. By the end of the 1950s, their heydays, the number of stages had more than doubled, with total attendance at army service clubs in the first three months of 1958 averaging approximately 200,000.¹⁶ Although audiences consisted mostly of relatively young Americans, some eighty per cent of whom were in their early twenties, the shows had a profound influence on Koreans. Along with foreign movies, the radio broadcasts of the Voice of the United Nations Command (VUNC)¹⁷ and American Forces Network Korea (AFKN), and a thriving black market for bootlegs of American hits, they played a crucial role in the dissemination of Western popular music and associated fads in Korea. They introduced the latest music, dance and fashion trends, and set new standards of live performance.

The entertainment flown in from overseas could not keep up with demand in this unknown, bleak alley of Asia. In his 1949 “Informal Shows Manual,” Broadway actor and playwright Ted Tiller had proposed female impersonation as an alternative to professional entertainment:

This is always good, sure-fire comedy if handled properly. Rather than try for realism or to suggest effeminacy, it is better and funnier to exaggerate incongruities, to let the masculine chest hair show through the deep plunging negligee neckline, to capitalize on the brawny arms, the bulging biceps, the large feet and the Adam’s apples. The bigger, the gawkier the guy you put into a

slinky evening gown for your heroine, the louder howls you'll win from your audience.¹⁸

But the humor of a burlesque act would wear off and could only satisfy the need for entertainment so many times. Upon the outbreak of war, reports of heavy enemy fire, harsh winters and limited facilities nevertheless discouraged many entertainers from traveling to Korea. A news report from October 1952 was headlined, "Korea Front Rated Roughest For Show."¹⁹ Indeed, while some American celebrities were transported to venues by helicopter,²⁰ to the vast majority of entertainers the touring conditions were rough and hazardous. Band members of the American accordionist and singer Dick Contino, for example, were treated for shock in hospital after their truck came under enemy fire on the way to a venue: "Shock and minor abrasions were suffered by a few members of the group as they sought cover from incoming enemy high trajectory missiles. The troop continued to perform after a brief respite."²¹ In August 1955, four Korean singers were killed and 29 others injured when the brakes failed on a truck that was supposed to take them to a performance venue, sending it off a cliff.²² Sue Kim, of the singing trio The Kim Sisters, told me that it was often difficult to get to a venue in the countryside:

We would ride for two-and-a-half, sometimes many hours; there was no road. It was all rocks [...]. Sometimes the driver, the GI was drunk, and he'd go, like, 60, 70 miles an hour. And we were so little. We wore parkas, with fur, but all the dust came in, so when you got off the truck nobody recognised you. And one time we fell off and we almost died. And I remember that one time it was so cold that we were frozen in the truck and we couldn't get up, so the GI literally carried us out and took us to the fireplace. We had to melt. And we cried, it was so cold. And yet, we had to perform; we wanted to perform. So we'd sit in front of the fireplace and warmed up, and then we went to perform. But we just had to do that, to survive, you know. If we didn't do that, we wouldn't eat. So we had no choice.

In winter the musicians often performed in icy conditions on frozen instruments.²³ According to Shin Chunghyŏn, the pioneer of Korean rock music who began his career as a guitarist for several shows in 1957, the conditions took a toll on both the musicians and the instruments: “When the truck arrived, I’d be sitting on the edge. It was all dirt roads in those days. There was no asphalt. So there was all that dirt hitting you. So once we arrived at an office, we had to wash all our instruments before going on stage.”²⁴

Those still prepared to tour the camps in spite of the enemy attacks, challenging physical conditions and limited facilities, were required to commit to a busy schedule that usually entailed both traveling and rehearsing or performing once or twice daily.²⁵ Therefore, many entertainers avoided touring Korea despite the great demand for entertainment. In order to meet the growing demand, the U.S. military began, from 1950 onward, to increasingly recruit entertainers as an affordable and readily available alternative.²⁶

The Conditions of Auditions

Many of the Korean acts that appeared on stage during and immediately after the War did so in order to make a living, not necessarily to pursue a career. The quality of their shows was generally low, and many performing groups came and went.²⁷ In addition, few Koreans were able to perform Western-style pop music at first. During the military conflict, a fair proportion of the entertainment Koreans provided constituted traditional music, which would have sounded considerably more melancholic to U.S. servicemen than the Western music they were accustomed to.²⁸ Although the conditions for performing were often seedy and salacious, devoid of any prestige, paid employment nevertheless helped secure a steady number of new Korean “talents.” In 1950 and 1951, EUSAK’s monthly budget for Korean entertainment lay around \$3,000 (USD 3,000), but in the late fifties, when the number of venues are said to have reached 264, the figure increased exponentially, to approximately \$100,000 each month.²⁹ Around this time, the army paid Shin Chunghyŏn approximated ₩3,000 (KRW 3,000)—roughly \$5—

per month for touring U.S. military stages.³⁰ Although the conditions were poor and the earnings negligible compared to that of their foreign counterparts, the money allowed Koreans to support their families. A fast-growing number of Korean entertainers therefore began to focus on EUSAK shows.

While most American and other foreign non-celebrity entertainers touring Korea had auditioned overseas, U.S. soldiers interested in entertaining themselves were increasingly encouraged to do so.³¹ But anyone hoping to land a contract to perform in front of U.S. troops had to audition, regardless of their nationality. Although the auditions were open to all aspiring entertainers, individuals rarely entered. Bands and variety entertainment troupes would often enter upon the recommendation of a talent agency or music insider. In the early 1960s, at least, agencies nominating a unit were expected to supply a descriptive brochure to the Special Services officer two weeks in advance.³² The auditions were organized rather informally at first, at the Kukto Theater and Chosen Hotel,³³ but they eventually became formal, routine events, held at the United States Information Service (USIS) in Yongsan District, the location of EUSAK's headquarters, once every three to six months, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. They were compulsory for all performing artists, even those who had impressed the judges before.³⁴

The auditions gave rise to local talent agencies. In the early 1950s there was only one, Hwayang, which was established by former showman Benny Kim (Kim Yöngsun), sometimes nicknamed the godfather of EUSAK shows, along with An Inok. A Korean directive from 1957 that made the licensing of a talent agency conditional upon its official registration with the Department of Commerce and Industry (Sanggongbu) shows that the number of agencies was increasing. Among the agencies that would eventually try to occupy a share of the growing market for live entertainment were Universal, Samjin, Kongyöng, Taeyöng, Samyang, Shinil, Küktong, Söngjin, Aju and Tongil. They initially set up their business around Wönhyo-ro ipku and It'aewön, the small shopping and entertainment districts bordering on Yongsan, but eventually branched out to places like Kunsan, Songt'an, P'yöngt'aek, Munsan, Ŭijöngbu and Tongduch'ön.³⁵ Since all bookings had to be

made through the official booking office, the companies will have tried to establish good relations with it.³⁶

Shin Chunghyŏn was one of many young aspirant entertainers. While still in middle school he began learning to play the acoustic guitar first, practicing several Western songs, including well-known Elvis Presley hits, using an issue of *Song Folio*. This was a music book series published by the U.S. Department of Defense that contained lyrics and music, and in the 1950s was distributed in Korea in numbers of up to 2,000 each month.³⁷ Shin obtained his first copy in Seoul's central neighborhood of Myŏngdong, where people were piling up books that had been picked up by truck from the military compounds. Sometime during high school, on a day off, he took his guitar to the live music hall inside the Shinsegae Department Store where he was approached by bandleader Kim Kwangsu, who asked him what brought him there. Shin told me,

So I introduce myself and tell him that I play guitar and sing, and I ask him to try me out one time, and he laughs. Because I am still wearing my middle school uniform, you see. And he says, "well, then let's hear it." So now I am on this rooftop with my guitar over my shoulder, and I am thinking, "what shall I play?" and I just played some chords. He then tells me to come inside and makes me get on this stage and asks me what song, and when I tell him I'll play an Elvis Presley song, "All Shook Up," he goes, "let's hear it."³⁸

Shin played in Kim's band for approximately two years. Eventually, he also landed a job teaching guitar at one of the music schools in nearby Jongno District. But although he made quite a name for himself and the school, he was not paid and was often forced to rely on friends to buy him food. Having made up his mind to try to get work entertaining American military, he went to try his luck at the talent agencies at Wŏnhyo-ro ipku. At one of them, a man asked him to perform a few songs, including some blues. As soon as he finished playing, Shin was told he would have work from the following day. But he still had cause for concern: "I needed an instrument. I could not use an acoustic guitar;

I had to have an electric guitar. So I told him I had one, absolutely. Because if I told him I didn't have one, he would cut me. So now I had to really worry again."³⁹ Guitars were not available in large numbers and even the musical supplies to American soldiers were limited so broken strings could not always be replaced.⁴⁰ In October 1951, for example, EUSAK received 155 guitars, but only 150 spare string sets.⁴¹ By the mid 1950s, conditions had improved, but electric guitars continued to be in considerable demand. They were only supplied in small numbers, so the army was in no position to lend them to anyone for extended periods of time. Eventually, a friend encouraged Shin to go back to the guitar school on Jongno's main road and ask for help. The school owner then took him to Jongno 2-ga, where a few music stores, the very first ones in Korea, were located, and told him to buy what he needed. Shin chose a guitar and an amplifier, and went to perform for the American troops the next day.

Shin recalls eventually being asked to audition at USIS in Yongsan. At first it was every six months, but later it became once every three months.⁴² Chaired by the chief of EUSAK shows, the panel of judges was mostly comprised of Special Services officers, though service club owners and Korean talent agencies would also regularly attend.⁴³ According to a news report from April 1964, the judges would rate the overall quality of the acts based on the following criteria: the positioning of singers and their fellow band members; the quality of the sound and the clarity of the melody; the pronunciation of English; the softness of the singer's emotional expression; the introduction of popular dance steps; the synergy between the use of costumes and lighting; the quality of showmanship; and the overall degree of entertainment.⁴⁴ These criteria more or less correspond with those given by Yi Paekch'ŏn, a former performer who served as an interpreter for Hwayang during these auditions.⁴⁵ Few performers would have been able to meet all criteria, but in order to get at least a passable rating, they had to be able to put on a show. Particularly important in this regard was the choreography of the set as a whole. Since the sound quality of shows was often poor — former performer Jerry Cospar recalls how on one occasion due to artillery fire a series of shows were “seen and not heard”⁴⁶—judges

would have given preference to spectacle and exuberance.

Shows thus had to appeal to the eyes first and foremost. The young and predominantly male audience preferred female performers, whose vocal quality mattered less than their looks.⁴⁷ The names of USO shows reflect this: among the shows presented in July 1955 were “Belles of Indiana,” “Wanda Smith Cover Girls,” and “Miss Atlanta.”⁴⁸ Sue Kim recalls this preference being evident also during auditions: “When a man came up, a tap dancer, they would go “boo, we want a girl!” I remember this so clearly. The minute they went up, they wanted a girl instead. [...] It didn’t matter how well they tap-danced.”⁴⁹ During and after the Korean War female performers certainly did not always wear revealing clothes. But because it was found that audiences preferred watching entertainers dressed in civilian clothing, the army approved the request that entertainers be allowed to travel and perform in civilian clothes.⁵⁰ While women wore short skirts and dresses, their male counterparts wore suits.⁵¹ It is likely that the key criteria for male performers were musicianship and performing talent, but the show as a whole, including the men, still had to look the part. Indeed, one former male singer told Yu Jung Lee that apart from having a hearty voice, good looks helped to win over the judges.⁵²

A single audition took approximately one hour, so when in 1961 auditions were required to select the members of a UN army show group from among approximately forty variety shows, it took three days, from 12 to 15 June.⁵³ Mere music acts were rare; the majority of units auditioning also put on dance and comedy skits. A table of wages for entertainers from February 1951 considered collectives of more than 25 performers.⁵⁴ The judges informally categorized the bands into different genres, corresponding with the dominant preferences of the different ranges of military officers. This meant that ideally musicians had three types of repertoires: rock music for young soldiers, country music for sergeants, and swing jazz classics for the officers.⁵⁵ According to singer Hyun Mee, singers had to learn at least 12 foreign songs every three months,⁵⁶ including some with lyrics that resonated well with their homesick audiences.⁵⁷ But English was difficult. Although performers could tune into the radio stations daily to keep abreast of the latest hit

songs and practice their lyrics, the pronunciation and memorizing of English remained a considerable challenge.⁵⁸

Becoming Classified

Entertainment units, large and small, were informally subdivided into the superior category of floorshows and the lesser one of house bands. While floorshows were able to tour all military venues around the country as part of a variety show, the latter were tied to a single service club.⁵⁹ After a performance, the judges would classify the Korean groups and individual acts and tie them to a wage scale for indigenous entertainers. On 25 February 1951 such a scale was announced for the first time. A single performer would earn ₩6,000, ₩7,500 or ₩9,000, depending on whether he or she was listed as a class I-, II-, or III-performer respectively.⁶⁰ On 10 June 1952, the wage scale was updated, to ₩8,100, ₩10,100 and ₩12,000 respectively.⁶¹ On 19 April 1957, a second update changed the name of the top-rated Class III to the less confusing class A. Many Koreans recall having been rated somewhere from AA to A, B, C, to D so the official term for the top-rated class of performers was adjusted at least once more.⁶² While Patti Kim, for example, recalls being rated Special A,⁶³ Yi Hyesuk and Son Usök argue that the highest rating was Special Double A.⁶⁴ To Koreans, the highest rating promised good money and renown. According to former rock musician Shin Hyönsu, young people dreamed of being rated AA rather than getting into Seoul National University.⁶⁵ Once the classes were determined, performers were issued registration cards, and bookings would follow, usually on the fifteenth of the month. The wage class ultimately determined where and how often they would perform.⁶⁶

On 19 April 1957 a new directive for the employment of Korean civilian entertainment was issued which apart from establishing policies and procedures sought to “restrict engagement of entertainers except through authorized booking office.” The Special Services Officer of the Eight Army Support Command (EASCOM) would “designate an officer or Department of the Army Civilian” to supervise a central booking office, which would coordinate all procedures including certificates

for clearance for entertainers to travel in restricted areas.⁶⁷ Only those performers who passed the audition could be officially registered and thus allowed to be transported using army vehicles.⁶⁸ Auditions were now held on the first Monday and Tuesday of each month, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and they were open to club custodians or their representatives. Army reports show that from April to June and from July to September 1958, respectively 31 and 27 floorshows and 23 and 55 bands auditioned.⁶⁹

Performers would now be paid in U.S. dollars, with classes A to C earning \$6.60, \$5.40 and \$4.20 respectively. Although the pay covered up to three hours as standard, this included a performance of somewhere between 45 to 60 minutes, an intermission, and setting-up time. Those asked to perform for longer would be paid 150% of their usual fee per hour. In addition, entertainers who travelled over ten miles could also be reimbursed at the rate of \$2.00 per individual per round trip. All payments were to be made “to the manager or agent of the group.”⁷⁰ On 3 June 1958, however, when the number of Korean entertainment units involved in American military entertainment grew sharply,⁷¹ the rates were reduced to \$5.25, \$4.35 and \$3.45, possibly because of competition and the broadly improved conditions of performance. Bands made up of American servicemen nevertheless continued to be paid considerably more, between \$25 and \$70 per gig.⁷² The variety shows that passed the auditions for the UN army show held in June 1961 were promised respectively \$125, \$115, \$100, and \$75 for classes AA, A, B and C, with bands earning \$75, \$65, \$50, and \$45. While AA-rated singers were guaranteed earnings of ₩250,000 to ₩350,000, and show girls and bandmasters ₩300,000, the members of groups classified as C would all earn ₩100,000.⁷³

Korean entertainers and groups who had yet to establish themselves closely followed the example of their peers. And in the hope judges would remember them, most of them took on English names.⁷⁴ Because individual entertainers had little say in the style and composition of their music, Yu Jung Lee argues that the auditioning process served to standardize the entertainment provided by Koreans in a way that suited American tastes. She writes: “They developed their performance skills

through the intensive training process of imitation, and their repertoires were optimized to pass the audition with the company's show managers who were well-acquainted with American soldiers' tastes.⁷⁵ Indeed, the opportunities offered by the American army set clear criteria. The ability to emulate them was ultimately a condition for earning a rating. There was, however, considerable competition among Korean entertainment units. Having a female band member or an unusual performance act could make groups stand out, but the importance of meeting set expectations ultimately underpinned a degree of uniformity. Because it was very difficult for aspiring Koreans entertainers to acquire Western music instruments in the early 1950s, many of them focused on singing at first. The songs of popular American crooners were particularly attractive, not only because the lyrics were clear and easy to understand, but also because the vocal style required relatively little effort.⁷⁶ Although Korean entertainers sang local popular songs with elements of traditional music even in the 1960s, Western repertoires, harmony and vocal timbres became the standard.⁷⁷

To aspirant Korean performers the auditions were career defining. Many would struggle to make ends meet, unable to fall back on an alternative source of income. Fortunately for those landing an audition, however, even those receiving a low rating could be booked, though the unpredictability of financial security and the degrading conditions of performance would eventually lead many to discontinue when alternative career options presented themselves, which probably happened more to men than women. The performers and their agencies would have both hoped to impress or sway the judges. But since neither the auditions nor their judges were driven by commercial interests per se—the auditions were private affairs, run by anonymous servicemen whose job it was to secure a range of quality entertainment that the army would provide free of charge—they had to make the best of their time on stage.

Conclusion

The stated objective of U.S. military entertainment was “maximum

performer and audience participation in soldier show and soldier music activities [...] as a means of maintaining a high level of morale and mental fitness among military personnel.⁷⁸ Entertaining as many people as possible was thus the prime concern of the jury members and club owners. Since the Korean shows in particular were considered inferior alternatives to entertainment from overseas, auditions were intended not only to streamline the management of live entertainment and to guarantee the security of personnel, but also to ensure the overall quality of the entertainment was sufficient and would not disappoint. Much like those applied by Korean talent factories today, the criteria comprised much more than mere musical skill. They assessed musicianship, good looks and moves, and the ability to speak and sing in English, as well as the flexibility required to be part of a live band that had little time to set up and rehearse the conditions of the auditioning space. It is unlikely that jury members ever sought to manipulate the outcomes for other reasons, such as commercial gain, but the agencies that were occasionally present may have tried to sway them, by inflating the portfolios of their talents or offering personal favors. Sadly, however, the portfolios appear to have all been lost, and whereas U.S. army reports provide accounts of most events, they do not discuss experiences with talent agencies or club owners and rarely provide details on organizational or personnel issues.⁷⁹

The U.S. military shows served as a stepping stone for many of Korea's later pop stars. Those forming part of a floorshow could land contracts with the media, a prestigious venue like the Walker Hill resort, and even travel abroad. Since the Walker Hill relied on foreign clientele, the USO show circuit was an important source of its entertainment with the most popular foreign and Korean acts frequently being offered a contract. The auditions and subsequent classifications helped channel the creativity and talent of aspiring Korean entertainers into formats that suited specific types of venues.⁸⁰ Koreans were not, however, involved in the supply of talent only. They ran talent agencies and clubs of their own and played a supporting role in the wide range of Special Services operations. Although audiences were predominantly American, the military shows called for many compromises in terms of quality, style

and repertoire, and the conditions of their presentation, particularly during the war. They were a transnational, transcultural environment where Koreans and Americans collaborated in the provision of entertainment for American palates.⁸¹ Audiences had to adjust their expectations and accept Korean interpretations as well as elements of Korean culture, even when the repertoire was Western, but they could take comfort from the Koreans' zealous efforts to entertain them with their own culture.

Notes

¹ Reality talent shows that focus on music performing talent include Mnet's *Superstar K* (Syup'ösüt'a K; since 2009), *The Voice of Korea* (2012–2013), and *I Can See Your Voice* (Nö-üi moksori-ga poyö; since 2017), tvN's *Korea's Got Talent* (2011–2012), SBS's *Survival Audition K-pop Star* (Söbaiböl odisyön K-p'ap süt'a; since 2011), KBS's *Immortal Songs: Singing The Legend* (Pulhu-üi myönggok: chönsör-ül norae-hada; since 2007) and *Top Band* (Baendü söbaiböl TOP baendü; since 2011), and MBC's *Star Audition: The Great Birth* (Süt'a odisyön widaehan t'ansaeng; since 2010), and *I Am a Singer* (Na-nün kasuda; since 2011).

² Although the element of competition foregrounds comparison, the criteria applied are undefined. Kim Sung Sik [Kim Söngshik] and Kang Seung Mook [Kang Söngmuk], "Odisyön riöllit'i syo 'Süt'a odosyön widaehan t'ansaeng'-gwa 'Syup'ö süt'a K2'-üi p'aendöm hyönsang [A Study of the Fandom of Star Audition: The Great Birth and Superstar K2]," *Öllon kwahak yön'gu* [Studies in Media Science] 12, no. 3 (2012): 6, 9. However, because contestants are followed behind the scenes to reveal aspects of their personality and private life, their non-artistic merits form an important part of the equation.

³ In weekly elimination rounds, viewers are encouraged to take part in a nationwide, seemingly democratic poll that critics will note allows selection from a small number of pre-selected contestants performing a limited range of well-established styles of music. See, for example, Jeremy Gilbert, "What Does Democracy Feel Like? Form, Function, Affect, and the Materiality of the Sign," in *Discourse Theory and Critical Media Politics*, eds. Lincoln Dahlberg and Sean Phelan (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 92–93, 99.

⁴ As Jeremy Gilbert notes, the notion of the "innate talent" of individuals serves to "justify the obviously self-perpetuating nature of egalitarian institutions and social relations." Jeremy Gilbert, "What Does Democracy Feel Like?" 94.

⁵ In Korea in the 1930s, various phonograph records ran advertising campaigns for intentionally unidentified, blindfolded celebrity singers in order to eliminate a

similar public concern. See Roald Maliangkay, “New Symbolism and Retail Therapy: Advertising Novelties in Korea’s Colonial Period,” *East Asian History* 36 (2010): 48.

⁶ See John Lie, “What Is the K in K-pop? South Korean Popular Music, the Culture Industry, and National Identity,” *Korea Observer* 43, no. 3 (2012): 357; Inkyu Kang, “The Political Economy of Idols: South Korea’s Neoliberal Restructuring and Its Impact on the Entertainment Labour Force,” in *K-pop: The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry*, ed. Jung Bong Choi and Roald Maliangkay (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2015), 57; Michael Fuhr, *Globalization and Popular Music in South Korea: Sounding Out K-Pop* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 79–80.

⁷ Other contributing factors include the global popularity of the format itself and the element of viewer participation. See Han Na Shin, “Influence of American Media upon Korean Broadcasting Culture – Analyzing ‘American Idol’ vs. ‘Super Star K II’” (master’s thesis, Liberty University, 2012), 29, 31–32.

⁸ See Heejin Kim, “Military Band Musicians on the Border: Crossing over Musical Genres in the Transnational Space of the Korean War,” (doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), 82–83.

⁹ Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Special Services Officer, APO 301, June 15, 1951.

¹⁰ During the Korean War, the Special Services Platoons could rely on the services of entertainment specialists Ms Jinx Whitlow and Margaret E. “Skippy” Lynn, both originally stationed in Japan, who would train and sometimes recast units. See EUSAK, APO 301 (1–31 January 1953), Headquarters 10th Special Services Company, Historical Report Part 1: Staff Section Report Special Services Section EUSAK, March 1–31, 1951, 1–2 (section 10); *Stars and Stripes*, September 9, 1951, 1.

¹¹ See, for example, Daily Bulletin #80, Headquarters of the 2nd Logistical Command, APO 59, March 28, 1951.

¹² Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: ‘All-Girl’ Bands of the 1940s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 229.

¹³ One of the Special Services Road Shows, for example, was called Hillbilly Hayride. Heejin Kim, “Military Band Musicians on the Border,” 83.

¹⁴ The band was welcomed, though a request was made that any piano was substituted by an accordion because of the impracticality of moving a piano in forward areas. Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Adjutant General, APO 301 (ID: ZX 42619), 1 October 1951. In It’aewŏn in the early 1990s, a small number of privately-run clubs operated that focused specifically on an African American clientele. They presumably had predecessors going back as far as the 1950s.

¹⁵ Barbara Stahura, “The 1950s: Korea & After,” in *Delivering America*, ed. USO (Tampa: Faircount, 2001), 142–43; EUSAK, APO 301 (January–March 1958).

¹⁶ No Chaemyŏng, *Shin Chunghyŏn-gwa arūmdaun kangsan* [Shin Chung-hyŏn and the Beautiful Land] (Seoul: Saegil, 1994), 24.

¹⁷ The VUNC was in operations from 29 June 1951 to 30 June 1971. Chang Yǒngmin, “6.25 chǒnjaengi ‘Yuen ch’ongsaryǒngbu-ūi sori (VUNC)’ radio pangsong-e kwanhan koch’al [Study of Radio Broadcasts of the “Voice of the United Nations Command (VUNC)” at the Time of the Korean War],” *Han’guk kūnhyōndaee sa yǒn’gu* [Studies of Contemporary Korean History] 47 (2008): 281.

¹⁸ Ted Tiller, “Informal Shows Manual,” New York, July 1949, 55. Starr may have adopted the idea from existing shows, such as that organized by Tony Starr and his company from the Seventh Division in Korea in 1946. Their ‘Bits of Burlesque’ program comprised transvestite Hindu and Hawaiian dance, the French Can-Can, and striptease. See Roald Maliangkay, “Supporting Our Boys: American Military Entertainment and Korean Pop Music in the 1950s and Early-1960s,” in *Korean Pop Music: Riding the Wave*, ed. Keith Howard (UK: Global Oriental, 2006), 24.

¹⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1952, 20.

²⁰ *Daily Boston Globe*, November 1, 1951, 18a.

²¹ EUSAK, APO 301 (December 1–31, 1952), Headquarters 10th Special Services Company, Historical Report Part 1; Staff Section Report Special Services Section Headquarters EUSAK, APO 301, December 1–31, 1952. Having been jailed for several months for attempting to evade army induction, Contino redeemed himself by returning to Korea to perform for United States servicemen. He would later be honorably discharged as a staff sergeant and given a presidential pardon. See *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 25, 1951, 1.

²² *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 30, 1955, 23.

²³ *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1952, 20.

²⁴ Shin Jung Hyun, in discussion with the author, November 16, 2010.

²⁵ Frankie Conville, manager of the road show “Funfest Frolics” reported that in Korea they strictly lived in tents and usually performed close to the frontline. See *Stars and Stripes*, January 20, 1952.

²⁶ The rate at which local entertainers were recruited, however, did not increase until the second year of the Korean War. In September 1950, only one Korean variety show entertained U.S. forces, with dance, comedy, and English and Korean songs. *The New York Times*, September 14, 1950, 3; *The Atlanta Constitution*, September 14, 1950, 3.

²⁷ Shin Hyunjoon (Shin Hyōnjun), *Han’guk p’ab-ūi kogohak 1960* [Archaeology of Korean pop, 1960] (Seoul: Han’gil art, 2005), 25.

²⁸ See, for example, Daily Bulletin #204, Headquarters of the 2nd Logistical Command, APO 59, July 30, 1951.

²⁹ Sōn Sōngwōn 1993: 25; 1996: 26; 1999: 17; see also No Chaemyōng, *Shin Chunghyōn-gwa arūmdaun kangsan* [Shin Chunghyōn and the Beautiful Country] (Seoul: Saegil, 1994), 24; Shunya Yoshimi, “‘America’ as Desire and Violence: Americanization in Post-war Japan and Asia during the Cold War,” *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2003): 439. EUSAK spent a total of \$49,372.49 on Korean entertainment between

November 1, 1950 and December 1, 1951. See Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Special Services Officer, APO 301, January 15, 1952.

³⁰ Püraendü sūt'ori (Brand Story), *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch'ön* (Tongduch'ön, the hometown of K-pop) (Seoul: Mötchin sesang, 2012), 41. The conversion I provide is a very rough estimate due to the complexity of currency exchange rates around this time. See Young-Iob Chung, *South Korea in the Fast Lane: Economic Development and Capital Formation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 392.

³¹ *Daily Variety*, January 10, 1952; Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border," 85.

³² Headquarters EUSA, APO 301, Circular #28-12 (February 26, 1962), 22; see also Yi Hyesuk and Son Usök, *Han'guk taejung ūmak* (Seoul: Ries & Book, 2003), 78; Püraendü sūt'ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch'ön*, 81.

³³ *Tonga ilbo* (East Asia Daily), April 5, 1973, 5. Sue Kim told me that even in these early years The Kim Sisters had become popular enough not to have to audition: "Other shows were in serious competition with us. Because each time they came, they all wanted The Kim Sisters show. So they really had to audition. At the Choson Hotel, there was an officer's club. I remember very clearly, that was the place where everybody auditioned, big time. This was local. They set the date: they would all be lined up. We're the first ones to start, but we didn't audition, we didn't have to." Sue Kim, in discussion with the author, December 1, 2009.

³⁴ Shin Hyunjoon, *Han'guk p'ab-üi kogohak 1960*, 26–27. Major subordinate and separate U.S. military unit commanders were asked to pass on the names of any qualified entertainer among their personnel to Headquarters. See Daily Bulletin #232, Headquarters of the 2nd Logistical Command, APO 59, August 27, 1951.

³⁵ Sön Söngwön, *P'algunsyo-esö raep-kkaji* [From the eighth army shows to rap] (Seoul: Arüm ch'ulp'ansa, 1993), 56; Shin Hyunjoon, *Han'guk p'ab-üi kogohak 1960*, 26–27, 298; No Chaemyöng, *Shin Chunghyöñ-gwa arümdaun kangsan*, 22; Püraendü sūt'ori, *K-POP-i kohyang Tongduch'ön*, 15.

³⁶ The companies are reminiscent of the *kisaeng* agencies that prevailed during the period of Japanese colonial rule. See Roald Maliangkay, *Broken Voices: Postcolonial Entanglements and the Preservation of Korea's Central Folksong Traditions* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 102.

³⁷ EUSAK, APO 301, September–December 1958, p. 6; see also Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border," p. 85n44.

³⁸ Shin Jung Hyun, in discussion with the author, November 16, 2010.

³⁹ Shin Jung Hyun, in discussion with the author, November 16, 2010.

⁴⁰ Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Adjutant General, APO 301, October 12, 1951.

⁴¹ In December that year, a total of 4,281 musical instruments were allocated to the U.S. military. See Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Adjutant General, APO 301, Jan 3, 1952.

⁴² According to a 1957 directive, an auditioning committee would assess entertainment units on the first Monday and Tuesday of each month, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. at a facility designated by the committee. Each entertainment unit had to audition at least once every four months, though in the case of complaints units could be asked to audition earlier. The committee consisted of three officers, three enlisted men who were actively engaged in open mess operation or management, and one civilian from the army department. See Headquarters US Army Forces, Far East and EUSA, APO 301, Circular #28-9 (April 19, 1957).

⁴³ Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border: Crossing over Musical Genres in the Transnational Space of the Korean War" (doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2013), 221n131; Yu Jung Lee, "Imperial Entertainers: Korean Women Camp Show Entertainers' Transnational Performance under US Hegemony, 1937-1975" (doctoral dissertation, University of Hawai'i, 2016), 69n94.

⁴⁴ Pak Kiyŏng, "Yishik kŭrigo tongnip: Han'guk modŏn p'ok'ŭ ūmag-ŭi sŏngnip-kwa chŏng (1968nyŏn-1975nyŏn) [Naturalization and Independence: Korean Modern Folk Music's Process of Development, 1968-1975]" (master's thesis, Dankook University, 2003), 67-68.

⁴⁵ Yi Paekch'ŏn recalled that the criteria included the speed of the proceedings, their diversity, and the degree of fun, as well as "phrasing, being in tune, English diction, the balance between the melody and the accompaniment, aspects of ensemble, blending of sound, volume control, tone color/voice color, musical organization, technique, execution; theatrical elements such as showmanship, stage manners, costume, uniform, make-up, dynamism, the build-up toward the climax and closing; and, additionally, the quality of the interpretations, the creativity in the production numbers, and audience reaction." See Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border: Crossing over Musical Genres in the Transnational Space of the Korean War," 221n132.

⁴⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1952, 20.

⁴⁷ When Patti Kim debuted on a USO stage in March 1959, however, rumour spread fast that there was a female singer who managed to combine sexiness with explosive vocal power. Im Jinmo, *Uri taejung ūmak-ŭi k'ŭn pyŏldŭl* [The Great Stars of Korean Pop Music] (Seoul: Minmidiŏ, 2004), 56.

⁴⁸ Special Services Section, Quarterly Historical Report, YMHS-2, July 1 - September 30, 1955, 1.

⁴⁹ Sue Kim, in discussion with author, December 1, 2009.

⁵⁰ Staff Section Report Special Services Section EUSAK, March 1-31, 1951, 1-2 (section 11).

⁵¹ Pŭraendŭ sŭt'ori, *K-POP-ŭi kohyang Tongdŭch'ŏn*, 124.

⁵² Yu Jung Lee, "Imperial Entertainers," 101.

⁵³ *Tonga Ilbo* (East Asia Daily) June 6, 1961, 4.

⁵⁴ Staff Section Report Special Services Section EUSAK, February 1-28, 1951,

unpaged appendix.

⁵⁵ Roald Maliangkay, “Supporting Our Boys: American Military Entertainment and Korean Pop Music in the 1950s and Early-1960s,” 27; Shin Hyunjoon, *Han’guk p’ab-üi kogohak* 1960, 28; Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 61, 82.

⁵⁶ Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 126.

⁵⁷ In addition to requesting a range of music styles, judges also preferred songs about the “home.” See Yu Jung Lee, “Imperial Entertainers,” 90.

⁵⁸ Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 62. In order to get the pronunciation right, Hyun Mee recalls paying close attention to the voice of the AFKN announcer. See Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 126.

⁵⁹ A third category, that of open bands, comprised bands that had not yet gone through any audition; they played on demand in the small clubs run by Koreans in military towns. See Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 18, 75; Yu Jung Lee, “Imperial Entertainers,” 84n128.

⁶⁰ Staff Section Report Special Services Section EUSAK, February 1–28, 1951, section 44.

⁶¹ EUSAK circular #21, paragraph 3a. Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Special Services Officer, APO 301, June 10, 1952.

⁶² Shin Hyunjoon, *Han’guk p’ab-üi kogohak* 1960, 26–27; see also <http://www.newsmaker.or.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=4964>.

⁶³ *Tonga ilbo* (East Asia Daily), April 23, 1995, 9. In the early 1960s, one act called itself the Three A Show. *Tonga ilbo*, April 5, 1973, 5.

⁶⁴ Yi Hyesuk and Son Usök, *Han’guk taejung ümak*, 71–72.

⁶⁵ Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 162.

⁶⁶ In the early 1950s, one booking office was located in Ta-dong, in central Seoul; later the Eighth Army Cultural Center also served as booking office. See *Tonga ilbo*, April 5, 1973, 5; Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 126.

⁶⁷ Headquarters US Army Forces, Far East and EUSA, APO 301, Circular #28-9 (April 19, 1957).

⁶⁸ A registration card is shown on page 27 of Shin Hyunjoon, *Han’guk p’ab-üi kogohak* 1960.

⁶⁹ EUSAK, APO 301 (April–June 1958), III — Recreation Division (p. 4); EUSAK, APO 301 (July–September 1958), III — Recreation Division.

⁷⁰ Headquarters US Army Forces, Far East and EUSA, APO 301, Circular #28-9 (19 April 1957).

⁷¹ Heejin Kim, “Military Band Musicians on the Border,” 96.

⁷² Headquarters EUSAK, Circular 680–20, APO 301, June 3, 1958; Headquarters EUSAK, Circular 680–20 C1, APO 301, August 9, 1958.

⁷³ *Tonga ilbo* (East Asia Daily) June 6, 1961, 4. At one point, singer Hyun Mee earned ₩1,000,000. See Püraendü süt’ori, *K-POP-üi kohyang Tongduch’ön*, 125.

⁷⁴ One example is Shin Chunghyön, who for a few years went as Hichy Shin (Hik’i

Shin). See Shin Hyunjoon, *Han'guk p'ab-ŭi kogohak 1960*, 130. Shin Hyunjoon notes (249), however, that once they began touring, some groups, like that of base player Yi T'aewŏn, changed their name annually to make audiences believe they were a novel act.

⁷⁵ Yu Jung Lee, "Imperial Entertainers: Korean Women Camp Show Entertainers' Transnational Performance under US Hegemony, 1937–1975," 98.

⁷⁶ An army report from October 1951 notes that "musical instruments have been received, but not in sufficient quantities to take care of demand [...] Limited amounts of guitar, ukulele and banjo strings have been received and has helped [sic] considerably in alleviating the critical shortage of these items." See Headquarters EUSAK, Office of the Adjutant General, APO 301, October 12, 1951.

⁷⁷ Yongwoo Lee, "Embedded Voices In Between Empires: The Cultural Formation of Korean Popular Music in Modern Times" (doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2010), 235n274.

⁷⁸ See Headquarters EUSA, APO 301, Circular #680-20 (June 3, 1958), 7.

⁷⁹ Due to their considerable popularity, the only Korean shows whose organization is mentioned in some detail are those of the Kim Sisters and the Korean Kittens. *Daily Bulletin* #223, APO 59, dated 18/8/51; *Daily Bulletin* #231, APO 59, dated 26/8/51; *Daily Bulletin* #245, APO 59, dated 9/9/51; *Daily Bulletin* #289, APO 59, dated 27/10/51.

⁸⁰ Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border," 221–22; Yu Jung Lee, "Imperial Entertainers: Korean Women Camp Show Entertainers' Transnational Performance under US Hegemony, 1937–1975," 98–99, 101.

⁸¹ Heejin Kim notes that since both American and Korean culture were themselves hybrid, the various forms of collaboration did not amount to the simple approximation of one culture to that of another. Heejin Kim, "Military Band Musicians on the Border," 15–18; see also Pnina Werbner, "The Dialectics of Cultural Hybridity," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Racism*, eds. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, 1–26 (London: Zed Books, 2015). Indeed, they resulted in the replacement of existing traditions with newer ones.