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## The Lack of Asian American Representation in American Pop Music

Victoria Noriega

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The Lack of Asian American Representation in American Pop Music

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By Victoria Noriega

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Pace University

Arts and Entertainment Management

Dr. Shinwon Noh

Department of Management and Management Sciences

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to analyze why there are fewer East and Southeast Asian Americans in the American pop music industry compared to other ethnicities and to see what factors influence these statistics. The data analyzed consisted of five interviews, all of whom were involved in the music industry as either musicians or managers. Data from the most recently signed artists to the top three major music companies, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Group, was also analyzed to see the most popular genre signed and most frequent ethnicity signed. From the data gathered from the record companies it was concluded that Pop music was the most likely signed genre and that White Americans were the most likely signed artists and more K-Pop artists were signed than Asian American artists. It was also concluded that the lack of representation in the participants' youth made an impact on why they wanted to pursue music. There was also a cultural pressure, from their parents or family, for the participants, but that they continued on the path they wanted to pursue and that mentorship from others in the industry played a big part in their pursuit in their fields.

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## **Introduction**

I began this research because I wanted to investigate the issue of why Asian Americans were so underrepresented in the American pop music industry and what steps there were to take to fix this problem. As well, when looking at the industry I wanted to see if there was a way to push for change. As I continued my research, I wanted to find what other factors might impede the success of Asian American artists in the American Pop industry, such as familial pressure and cultural differences.

I decided to take a mixed approach to my thesis by doing qualitative and quantitative research. I hoped that by doing a mixed approach I'd be able to find more information by interviewing Asian Americans in the industry and looking at record companies as well. There is a wide range of information available in regard to the American pop music industry and I wanted to be able to cover as much as I could in the short period of time I had. Diversity is a strong and powerful conversation happening right now in the entertainment industry, and Asian Americans are still trying to find ways to fit themselves into it, which is why this topic felt the most pressing to address.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Impact of Negative Stereotypes**

The United States has constantly struggled with the acceptance of immigrants into society's culture since practically its beginning as a country. This struggle has formed the "perpetual foreigner syndrome" (Huynh et al., 2011), the idea that ethnic minorities will always be seen as "other" according to white America. This "syndrome" has specifically plagued Asian Americans since the beginning of their migration to the United States. A look into the history of

Asian migration explains the difficulties for their assimilation into American culture and how it still constantly affects them.

The United States passed the first anti-Asian regulation law in 1870, which barred Asian immigrants from gaining citizenship (Jo & Mast, 1993). The United States government then passed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which was the first noteworthy law limiting immigration into the US. This law was meant to repress the influx of Chinese immigrants that had come in due to a crop failure in China in 1852. It suspended Chinese immigration for 10 years and prohibited Chinese immigrants from obtaining naturalization (Jo & Mast, 1993). This all occurred when the Chinese population only made up .002 of the entire United States population (History.com Staff, 2018). The act was again renewed in 1892 for another ten years; then, in 1902, Chinese immigration was permanently made illegal. This caused a steep decline in the Chinese population in the US and the Chinese were not eligible for citizenship until 1943. Many of these laws were put into place to pacify white American workers' demands for Chinese immigrants to be removed and ease the worries about maintaining white "racial purity" (History.com Staff, 2018). This also caused later movements for immigration restriction against other immigrant groups such as Middle Easterners, Hindu and East Indians, and the Japanese (History.com Staff, 2018).

We then jump to 1942, after the Pearl Harbor bombing, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 intending to prevent espionage on American shores (History.com Staff, 2009). This allowed the mass incarceration of nearly 120,000 American citizens and legal residents of Japanese ancestry without due process. Mari Uyehara, a writer for GQ magazine, recounts her grandparents' stories: "My California-born grandparents, Hiroshi and

Grayce Uyehara, were among them, forcibly removed and put in horse stalls behind barbed wire” (Uyehara, 2018). Japanese Americans affected by this are still impacted today. In the Harvard Gazette, Liz Mineo speaks about the effects the internment camps had on Japanese-Americans. She states, “Internees who were sent to wealthier locations earned more and were more likely to complete college and work in higher-status careers. Those who were put in poor, rural areas far away from cultural centers received less education, lived in worse housing, and earned less money” (Mineo, 2017). She then goes on to say that those from better-off areas were usually more assimilated into US society. In 1980, researchers found that those “placed in the poorest camp earned 17 percent less than those placed in the camp in the most affluent region” (Mineo, 2017). The internment camps were not stopped until 1945, following the *Endo v. The United States* Supreme Court ruling.

During the time after World War II, the attitude towards Asian Americans began to change. The image of Asian Americans changed from posing a threat to now being “compliant, quiet and docile” (Jo & Mast, 1993). This began to stem from the civil rights movement when America saw African Americans as aggressive and dangerous to society. While they did fight for their civil rights, Asian Americans were barely coming out of conflicts such as the Korean War and the Vietnam War and were not making, as what white America perceived, such large displays of civil unrest. This gave Asian Americans a positive image because they were following the idea that immigrants should assimilate through hard work, education, and quietly remain in the background to not cause issues. But, while this helped them get a positive image in society, it also began the stereotype that Asian Americans were all successful with usually high family incomes and educational achievement. It began the idea that Asian Americans only

succeed in professions associated with high intelligence such as doctors, lawyers, and classical musicians. Although these stereotypes only represented a small portion of the entire Asian American population, it is what now puts a heavily ingrained constraint on the mobility of Asian Americans in society.

This peace lasted only for a short period. In 1982, two white autoworkers beat a 27-year old Chinese American engineer named Vincent Chin to death following his bachelor party outside a bar in Detroit (Kai-Hwa Wang, 2017). During this time, the US auto industry was facing a rising unemployment rate, and simultaneously, Japanese auto manufacturers were beginning to appear in the US. Witnesses said that the two men were telling Chin that it was because of people like him that they were out of jobs. The two men repeatedly struck Chin with a baseball bat, and he died four days later (Kai-Hwa Wang, 2017). Neither men spent a day in jail and were only sentenced to three years' probation with a \$3,000 fine. This spurred a unity between Asian Americans across the country to advocate for change. However, anti-Asian sentiments did not end there. In 1987, during the Iran-Contra hearings, a Japanese American Senator, Daniel Inouye, a decorated war veteran, began to receive racially motivated hate letters (Jo & Mast, 1993). The letters said that he had no right to question Colonel North, a man who allegedly took part in the Iran-Contra affairs, and that he should go back to Japan although Senator Inouye was a native-born American. These negative views against Asians and the rampant xenophobia only began to further implement the idea that they were never truly Americans according to white America. This "perpetual foreigner syndrome" continually hinders assimilation into American society for minorities and spans across all aspects of American life.

### **History of Asian American Musicians**

Asian Americans have struggled with finding their place in American culture since their arrival, and that is especially shown in the music industry. When Chinese sojourners, those who came into the United States to work for a short period of time then return home, first arrived they began the tradition of *mok-yu* (“fish song”), which were “folk songs composed by early Chinese settlers up and down the Pacific coast” (Wang, 2001) and they described their struggles and sorrows as immigrants in America. Then in the 1950s Asian American jazz bands began to gain popularity, especially in California and Washington. Second and third-generation Asian Americans continued to try and fit into white American culture by trying their first strategy to break into the industry: to assimilate. They began to work their way into American pop culture as actor James Shigeta did. James Shigeta was a second-generation Japanese American who was quite successful in his acting career and even went into music for a short period of time.

He signed with Silver Slipper Records in the late 1950s and released *Scene One* under the name Jimmy Shigeta. Although Shigeta tried to blend in as much as possible to the American music culture of the time, he still needed to be aware of his ethnic difference. Many American reporters made comments such as “the Frank Sinatra of Japan,” which reinforced the idea that no matter how hard he tried to separate himself from his cultural identity, it was difficult to just be seen as American rather than Japanese. In order for artists like James Shigeta to gain true recognition, they would not only have to prove themselves in the music industry but face the trials of American society itself imposed on them.

In the 1970s, there was a change in tune as Asian Americans began the Asian American Movement, which came after the black Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. This spurred the

question “who are we?” and that question is what rallied Asian Americans to begin to make their cultural footprint to define that question. Asian Americans then began to implement their second strategy: to express their ethnic identity. One major group that spurred this movement through music was the panethnic band by the name of Hiroshima. Hiroshima, and other musical artists of that generation, were influenced by the political climate around them.

Hiroshima made music that explored the cultural complexity of their community. They named themselves after the first city that was bombed in the atomic bombings, but they saw themselves “as the phoenix that rose from the ashes” (Wang, 2001). They are, to this day, one of the most successful Asian American groups in history. They were signed to Epic and Arista for more than ten years and had both a gold record, 1985’s *Another Place*, and a Grammy-nominated album, 1983’s *Third Generation*, and many other accomplishments.

Hiroshima wanted to make a unique identity through their music. They used music as a way to explore their identity and used sound to bring out the distinctions that went into their idea of Asian America. They did this mainly by using traditional Asian instruments, specifically the taiko drumming, koto playing, and Asian woodwinds. Dan Kuramoto, one of the founding members of Hiroshima, stated that he wanted to use their music to show that Asian Americans were “real people with really real lives” (Kubo, 1975), and they wanted to spread this message to everyone. It resulted in them creating music that had both the influence of Eastern music mixed with American styles of music, like funk, rock, soul, and jazz.

After the Asian American Movement, a new generation of Asian Americans was formed. This new generation was made up of either immigrant-born Asians or Asians who were born after the 1960s. Their idea of panethnicity was different from the immigrants before them. They

no longer agreed that they could all relate to common themes. They began to address the significant cultural differences between the Asian American community that had begun to develop. Eric Liu (1999) writes, “We are inventors, all. We assemble ourselves from fragments of story. Every identity is a social construction, a drawing of arbitrary lines. But are all identities *equally* arbitrary—and equally necessary?” Liu desired a “cost-free, neutral, fluid” identity, one that people choose rather than have imposed on them. Liu is a post-1965 second-generation Chinese American and his ideas seemed to reflect his peers when looking at the increasing uncertainty that Asian American musicians exhibited toward identity politics in their music.

This uncertainty began to emerge in the music of Asian Americans when they started to create two parallel music styles. On one side, there were still musicians who were committed to a sense of community, social justice and identity politics like Hiroshima. On the other side, a new wave of Asian Americans began to enter into the pop music industry, and still are now. This new third strategy began when unlike the Asian Americans who made music before, they were not looking to make music for, by and about Asian Americans, but for a wider audience beyond their ethnicity. They weren’t rejecting their ethnicity, but they wanted to expand to everyone. They began to lead a major push in popular media by working and thriving in smaller niches of the music market. At this time, only a handful were signed to major labels and like now, were still pushing to break into the American music market.

This new generation’s viewpoint was best reflected in the emerging hip-hop artists’ music. At the beginning of the 1990s, rap groups such as Fists of Fury from San Francisco continued on the influence of politics in their music. They would address key issues such as antiracism, social justice, and fighting stereotypes. They also addressed topics such as the

model-minority-myth among Asian American students and its racial divisiveness as well (Wang, 2001). One of the members, C.Y.A.T (Darrow Han), said the group was drawn to the genre because they believed that it had, politically, the most potential to spread their word to the people who would want to listen.

The idea that Han had about hip-hop being a good medium for political discourse changed majorly in the mid-1990s when more Asian American artists began to enter the hip-hop market. These new artists were interested in hip-hop for the career or culture and not for the political discourse. Artists such as the Mountain Brothers, a trio of Chinese American rappers from Philadelphia, began to expand beyond political discourse and more on their own personal experiences. They did not try to hide their ethnicity, but they normalized it into their songs and didn't make it the sole focus. The audience with which they were trying to communicate was not aimed to avoid or ignore Asian Americans, but they weren't specifically targeting them either. These groups began to be pushed more to the side of aesthetics rather than politics. They wanted their audience to be more focused on their artistry rather than their ethnicity.

Then, adding more to the complexity of Asian American artists in this era, artists such as Jamez, James Chang, from Flushing, Queens began to appear. Jamez described his music as "Azian/Pacific Renaissance." Through his music, he tried to educate young Asian Americans to their "cultural heritage of music" that he felt was lacking. In order to do so, Jamez blended traditional Korean and contemporary hip-hop aesthetics to try and reach Korean American youth through music. He felt that his discovery of Korean music helped him to better explore his identity. Wang (2001) quotes Jamez from a personal interview stating, "in the past, I had always tried to be somebody else (black, white, Latino, etc.) because I have never felt comfortable

speaking in Korean. I spoke other people's experiences, listened to other peoples' dialects. Learning about Korean music was like learning my native tongue, albeit musically." Through his work, his goal was to expose Asian Americans to the "rich legacy" of music. Jamez was not aiming towards the idea of panethnicity but towards a cultural/political view that was more transnational or diasporic. His music aimed to be the bridge between traditional Korea and Koreans raised in America.

Asian Americans have changed their perception of who they want to be over time, and you can see it through their history in music. They started with wanting to try and push away their ethnic identity to be seen as American in the 1950s to moving onto wanting to highlight their ethnicity and take pride in their heritage in the 1970s and 80s. Now they are just as concerned with their careers as entertainers and artists as they are with being "community representatives" in their societies. They do not want to hide their ethnicity and heritage, but they do not want to make it the only thing about themselves.

### **Struggle with Record Labels**

Since historically there have not been many prominent Asian American pop musicians it is understandable for labels to be wary of what to expect from these uncharted territories. However, this lack of prominence stems from a place of established stereotypes against Asians in American society. As noted above, the perpetual foreigner syndrome is when ethnic minorities are considered "other" even if they were born and raised in American families and have no connection to their ancestral lands. This stems from the long and complicated history of Asian

Americans and the stereotypes imposed on them. This leads some Asian American musicians to pursue careers in Asia rather than America because they are more accepted into the industry.

An artist named Jay Park is an example of an Asian American taking their music career to Asia in order to gain fame. Park was born and raised in Seattle, Washington, but moved to Seoul, South Korea to pursue a career in music and dance in 2005. He gained immense fame and became the leader of a K-Pop group named 2PM. He ended up going solo, founding a Korean Hip-Hop label and making an all-around extremely successful career for himself over in Korea. He is also the first Asian American artist to be signed to Roc Nation, Jay-Z's label (Herman, 2017). Even though he has all of this success, Aran (2018) says, "... all it took was leaving the country he's from, putting in 12 years of work, and becoming Usher-level famous overseas. And even then, he still might not make it in America." This shows that one of the only ways an Asian American musician can gain fame is by going back to their ancestral land to try and be accepted then to come back home and bring that fame with them.

The issue that Asians are not marketable to the American public plagues the industry severely. Many artists have been told by record labels they would have been signed if they were not Asian (Oyiboke 2017). A common characteristic of many of the current famous Asian American pop musicians is that they have a racially ambiguous look, when you cannot tell if someone is Asian or another race. An example of this is Bruno Mars, who is one of the most famous musicians in America right now, but no one acknowledges he is Asian because of his racially ambiguous look. Because of this, artists like Mars, can be more easily marketed to the general public by major labels.

### **Erasure of Artists Culture by the Industry**

As stated above, racially ambiguous artists are rarely associated with Asian culture, or they are associated with a completely different culture altogether. This brings on the erasure of Asian American culture. Pisares (2006) writes, “Asian Americanists are unable to address the constructedness of race because their notion of panethnic identity relies upon an inadequate conception of ‘racial lumping,’ or white hegemony’s inability to distinguish between persons of different ethnicities and national origins.” Since Asians are one of the most diverse ethnic groups due to the wide variety of Asian cultures and appearances, it is hard for the general public to be able to distinguish specific groups. This could be due to the fact that usually in many American’s minds, people of different races tend to look alike and if you do not fit that mold, you are not a part of the community.

It is a problem that plagues many different ethnicities and cultures. For example, in a country like the Philippines, which was once ruled by Spain, they have Spanish last names and Spanish characteristics, so people pin them into the Latino category. Pisares (2006) describes perception as what someone infers another’s ethnic or racial identity is and cognition as when someone’s ethnic or racial identity is known and confirmed. These two terms are usually seen as the same, but the general public usually puts their perception, what they think someone’s ethnic or racial identity is, over what that person’s identity actually is. This stems from the erasure of their culture and their identity in the mass media.

As Nelson (2016) states, the United States has more absolute racial categories and a tendency to push racial stereotypes. This limits the choices available to people of color in choosing the racial or ethnic identity that best represents them. This leaves an open question of

where people of color feel like they fit in American society, especially when they feel as if they don't fit into their ancestral culture or American culture. As stated above, Asians felt a strong need to assimilate into American culture to rid themselves of the foreignness that they felt followed them. In turn, this has led to the media either placing Asian, multi-ethnic, and racially ambiguous artists in one of the United States' absolute racial categories or seeing them as solely foreign.

### **Buyer Power of Asian Americans**

Studies have shown that in 2014 Asian Americans spent an average of \$112 per year on music, which was about \$7 more than the average consumer. They also used Spotify nearly twice as much than the total market with 14.4 percent of Asian Americans compared to 7.6 percent of the total market. The market also points out that nearly 81 percent of Asian-Americans have smartphones while 70 percent of the total market has smartphones. Out of the 81 percent of Asian American smartphone users, 22 percent of them download music on their smartphones compared to 16 percent of the 70 percent of the total market (Nielsen, 2014). Contrary to music labels beliefs that Asian Americans mainly listen to traditionally Asian music 23 percent of Asian-Americans cited pop/top 40 as their preferred genre and 31 percent listed other traditionally popular American genres, such as hip-hop, R&B, rock, and country (Nielsen, 2014).

Asian Americans have also proven to have a large influence on the overall entertainment market with K-Pop gaining gradual worldwide fame over the last decade, with artists like Girls Generation, Psy, and BTS, and movies like *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018), which was the most successful romantic comedy at the box office in 9 years (Park, 2018) and *Parasite*, which won 4

awards including Best Picture at the Oscars in 2020 (Whipp, 2020). There is an idea that Asian Americans are not major influencers in the financial aspect of the entertainment market, specifically the music industry, which could be due to the lack of research done into the statistics of Asian Americans relating to entertainment. When looking for reports on Asian American spending in the US in the entertainment industry I found limited research. Trying to find a reason for this lack of information one can only assume it has to do with societal ideas, but there really is no explanation since the statistics do point at Asian Americans being a strong consumer.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore why there are fewer East and Southeast Asian Americans in the American pop music industry compared to other ethnicities. For the purpose of this study “East and Southeast Asian Americans” will encompass Americans of East and Southeast Asian descent, which will include those who were born in the United States or were raised here from a young age. “East and Southeast Asians” will encompass individuals from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, East Indies, Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia. This study will aim to gain a wider knowledge of the experiences of Asian-Americans in the music industry and what, if any, circumstances may be limiting their entrance into the American pop music industry. The questions this study aims to answer are:

1. Are there certain obstacles, such as racism and stereotypes, that play a part in the lack of representation? Or even obstacles, such as societal pressures, in Asian communities?
2. Is this new wave of Asian entertainment, such as *Crazy Rich Asians*, *Parasite* and K-Pop, bringing more general acceptance of Asians in American culture?

3. Does social media play a role in changing the music industry landscape by allowing artists to take control of marketing themselves?

I predict that stereotypes and racism will play a part in the lack of representation, but that this new wave of Asian entertainment will bring more acceptance from the general American public, and hopefully this will allow the music industry to push open doors for more diversity.

### **Methodology**

To properly research these themes thoroughly using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research is the best approach to this topic. The qualitative approach is used to explore the depths and complexity of this topic and is meant to highlight the unique experiences Asian Americans in the American pop music industry. The quantitative approach is used to look at the data pertaining to Asian Americans in the pop music industry by looking at the most recently signed artists to the major three music companies in the United States, Warner Music Group, Sony Music Entertainment, and Universal Music Group. This also takes into account the major subsidiaries of the major three music companies.

### **Participant Recruitment**

For this study, I aimed to recruit at least 5 participants who were at some point in the music industry as a musician. The participants needed to identify as Asian American, be at least eighteen years old, and currently work in music or have previously worked in a music career. Additionally, participants needed to have been born in the United States or immigrated to the United States before or during their teen years.

Recruitment was performed using convenience sampling and snowball sampling techniques. In order to be contacted, participants filled out their personal contact information through a Google Form survey. The survey link was shared with online music industry group pages on Facebook.

I was able to acquire 10 responses from the survey with more female than male responses. Most of the participants identified as East Asian at 70% and Southeast Asian at 30%. When asked to describe their current professional situation, it ranged from full-time bassists/keyboardists to Digital Marketing Manager. Most of the respondents stated that they were currently pursuing a career in the music industry as either musicians, songwriters, or managers.

I chose my sample by looking at their experiences and current professions. Additionally, I took into account their cultural heritage and if they were pursuing music full-time or part-time to try and find a wide enough range, while also trying to stay within the guidelines of what this study was aiming to do.

Out of the four individuals I contacted, all four of them responded. Additionally, I was connected with another participant who did not respond to the initial survey. One of the participants identified as male and four identified as females. Most of the participants identified as East Asian (primarily Korean) with an exception of two. All of the females were between the ages of 18 to 25, while the male was 26 to 35.

## **Study Design**

Once participants had chosen to join the study they were sent a consent form and a list of IRB-approved questions prior to the interview through email. The questions provided the basic structure of the interview. The questions were separated into three categories: introduction, history with music, and experience within the music industry.

## **Participant Summaries**

### **Claire.**

Claire is a music industry intern and artist manager in the greater Los Angeles, CA area. She is half Korean and half Japanese and grew up in the South Bay California area. She grew up in a very musical family. Her mom was a vocal major and her dad was very into music and she started classical music training at the age of 5 in instruments such as piano and viola. In high school she decided she wanted to pursue a career in music and that she wanted to make a difference in the community. She realized she wanted to help continue the push away from the monopolized way of record labels. She wanted to help artists gain their rights back, especially smaller artists. She has had multiple internships in the music industry in Public Relations, Publishing, and A&R, and has managed multiple bands. She is currently interning at a music management company called Best Friends Management in Los Angeles while also managing a band. She hopes to continue her career as a manager and to add more representation in the industry.

**Brian.**

Brian is a musician, songwriter, and now the Associate Director for Pop/Rock Membership at the The American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). He grew up in Los Angeles with immigrant Filipino parents. He has always been interested in music and began taking music lessons when he was in the third grade. He grew up with a wide range of musical interests ranging from The Beatles, Frank Sinatra, West Coast Hip-Hop, and Jimmy Eat World. He then went on to study Recording Arts at Loyola Marymount University and work at the radio station there named KXLU. He ended up becoming the general manager and during that time he continued to play music and formed his own band with his brother. During his senior year of college, his band got signed by a record label and they got sent out to the UK to tour. His band had toured with other bands such as the Kaiser Chiefs throughout their UK arena tour.

After his band he went into advertising and worked in that sector for a few years before going back into the music industry. He began working at ASCAP and is now at his current position. In his current position as the Associate Director for Pop/Rock Membership he works in songwriter relations. He helps writers with their networking and connections with other industry professionals and produces songwriter workshops/showcases/networking events. He hopes to continue to help artists, especially Asian American artists, by producing more events that connect Asian American music industry professionals with aspiring Asian American songwriters and musicians.

**Victoria.**

Victoria is a student, singer, bassist, and songwriter based in Bergen County, New Jersey. She grew up in Bergen County and is first generation Korean American on her father's side and

second generation Korean American on her mother's side. Her mother's side of the family has always been very musical, and her aunt went to Juilliard for classical piano. When she was 8, she began studying guitar and then went on to study with The School of Rock Music Program. She then began to learn the bass and started to play the bass in and out of bands since high school. She has done internships at record labels and has worked with booking shows at her school, which has given her a wide range of experience in the industry. She is currently the touring bassist for the band Squirrel Flower and is also releasing her own solo music.

**Elise.**

Elise is a pianist, songwriter, and producer based in Los Angeles. She was born in Tokyo, Japan to a Japanese mother and an American father and at the age of 8 she moved to Denver, Colorado. She began to explore her interest in music at a very young age having been born into a very musical family. She was accepted into a piano academy in Tokyo at the age of 7 and when she moved to Denver a year later, she continued her education in music. She then continued her education in music as she went on to college. She was accepted into USC's School of Music and continued to study piano performance with a classical emphasis. She picked up a Music Industry minor after watching her other classmates and began to learn more about production and recording. In her final year of school, she then immersed herself in the popular music program and that is where she found a strong basis for her songwriting, producing, arranging, and performance.

She is currently the keyboardist for the Grammy-nominated duo Chloe X Halle, whom she has performed with on shows such as MTV Music Video Awards and The Late Late Show with James Corden. She is also working on her own music and hopes to release more solo

projects in the future. She is very passionate about the inclusion of Asian American musicians in the music industry and hopes to be a source of hope for other Asian American musicians.

### **Grace.**

Grace is a Filipina singer-songwriter, producer, and performer under the name *Artemis Orion*. She grew up in Fulton, Mississippi and is currently based in Los Angeles, CA. She grew up practicing music by starting to sing at the age of 5, writing at the age of 7, and started to officially study music at the age of 9. She continued her journey of music by beginning to produce at the age of 14 and seriously pursuing production at 21. She studied Audio Production at Middle Tennessee State University with a minor in Video and Film.

### **Recently Signed Artists to Major Record Labels**

When gathering data on the most recently signed artists to the three major music companies, Warner Music Group (WMG), Sony Music Entertainment (SME), Universal Music Group (UMG), I went through the companies websites and then went to their biggest subsidiaries websites. From there I gathered their current artist roster and I searched for artists who were signed between the beginning of 2018 to the end of 2019. I also contacted friends who worked for those labels for any lists they had and asked my internship for their recent roster as well. I used the time frame of 2018-2019 rather than looking at the company's entire roster to narrow down my search. From those lists I found the artists genre and if I could, I found their racial/ethnic identity.

## Results

### Qualitative Data

Each interview lasted around 45 minutes to an hour and was manually transcribed by myself. Following transcription, I analyzed common themes in their answers.

#### Representation

A large part of my interviews looked into whether participants had seen representation growing up and how that affected their perception on becoming a musician and the responses varied. Many of them stated that while growing up they either didn't notice there wasn't much representation or just thought that's how it was going to be. Grace stated:

Honestly, I wasn't aware of it at the time. Even today, representation (and/or lack thereof) of Asian musical artists doesn't impact how I feel about my future in the industry. I'm so used to seeing diversity in the industry. At the end of the day, it's all about how passionate you really are about it and the work you put in. It's kind of astonishing to me, now that I think about it, how I've never thought of it before. If anything, being a female Asian-American in the music industry makes me feel different and empowered.

Brian shared the sentiment that not seeing representation didn't make him question whether he could do it, but he states:

When we were able to get into our music and we started doing interviews, subconsciously we [him and his brother] would always try to find a way to give a shoutout to our heritage, by giving a shout out to our family life, since it really formed how our band worked. I think for us, we knew there weren't a lot of other Filipinos doing what we did so there was a little bit of a sense of responsibility to do our best, but also not be too strong and beat people over the head with it. We would try to give a shout out to other Filipino out there who would maybe come across our music, but not have it be so alienating. So that's how looking at the

lack of representation worked out, it was more of a subconscious responsibility to give a shout out to where we came from.

However, Victoria notes that while she didn't notice she wasn't represented while growing up and that she got used to not seeing herself, that when representation did begin to appear, she got nervous that the industry wouldn't make room for more Asian American musicians. She felt that the industry would think that since they already have one, they're okay and wouldn't need more.

When asked about the topic of representation and her outlook on her future Claire added:

Not seeing representation was on one hand kind of inspiring and on the other it was really discouraging. Especially in the realm that I work in right now, it's a lot of local alternative/punk/indie stuff, so I don't see a lot of Asians at all in that aspect. On one hand it's kind of something I can put in my tool belt to kind of differentiate myself from other people and to be able to bring my experience to the table, but on the other hand it is discouraging because you don't feel like you have solidarity there. While even though you have solidarity as a person of color, my struggles as an Asian American will never be the same as someone who is Latinx or Black, it's so different. You wish you had that solidarity sometimes.

Elise also shared:

Not seeing representation didn't incline me to be an artist or anything because I was like, I don't see myself in these people. It was weird because we make such a big cultural part of this country.

Many of them noted that seeing this new representation with genres like K-Pop becoming big in the United States and groups such as 88Rising gaining fame was great and nice to see, it still felt different than being Asian American. Claire added to that in her interview:

While the representation with artists like BTS and 88Rising is great, it's not the same as growing up Asian American. The media will never understand your experience and they'll never be able to identify that unless someone who has grown up in your experience is there to represent you.

When asked about this Elise added:

BTS is an Asian group, not Asian American, and when people see us and they see them, especially people who are Asian Pacific American, they don't see the difference. A problem that I see is that people are like 'yeah there's Asian artists!' and yeah, they are, but they're not Asian American and they don't have the same stories to tell that we do.

### **Family and Culture Play a Role**

In the interviews we covered how they grew up and how they got into music. When we delved into these topics, I noticed there was a usual common theme. While most participants had families who were also interested in music and supportive of their interest in music, there was a common worry that it wouldn't be a stable job for their future. There was one point of view from parent's like Victoria's who said that her parents were always supportive of her pursuit of a career in music and that only when she decided to take a break from school were they apprehensive. On the other hand, Claire stated, "They were really afraid for me. Even though they were interested in music, they had jobs in finance, and they didn't really care what I did as long as I was successful and stable. They've always pushed for me to do jobs like theirs and not go into music." Brian also stated that when he went into college it was a compromise between him and his parents for him to get a business degree while still pursuing music so that he would have a backup plan.

Claire also noted that in her experience many of her first generation/second generation Asian American friends pursue careers that their family wants for them because it makes them happy. She noted that it was a common theme of having to pay back their family for all they did for them:

A lot of my family is in nursing and finance, and I'm kind of like the odd one out, the black sheep. They'll think 'she decided to pursue music because she doesn't care about her future and she doesn't care about providing for anyone in this family.'

When I asked Brian about worries he had in his career he added an interesting point on that concept. When he was working with his band he knew what he was doing was risky and since his parents struggled to come to the United States, they wanted to make sure that, "the work that they [his parents] put in for their children wasn't for naught." They didn't want to throw away all of what their parents built for them. The idea that a child from an immigrant family doesn't want to let the work their parents made for them to succeed go to waste can come from a place of gratitude or be burdensome to some.

Additionally, many of the participants pointed out that they thought the lack of representation in the industry and support from parents was more of a cultural issue rather than their parents exactly. Brian added onto that in his interview:

You have to look at it culturally in terms of the family dynamic and how people grew up. I know for myself; my parents and family are big proponents of putting your head down and not calling attention to yourself and not being loud and causing ruckus. I think for Filipino culture it's a little less ingrained, but in other cultures there's a certain stoicism and that doesn't compute sometimes in a creative industry, like music. A lot of music is about getting your name out there

and a little tasteful self-promotion and I don't think generationally some families accept that.

Elise also added:

There's always this discourse, as Asian American young people with parents who are immigrants or generational immigrants who are always like, we made it here by becoming lawyers, doctors, and you should do the same. It is the model minority idea that is instilled and that you can't do music it's not a legit career. But I think any immigrant race that's more on the recent side has this issue too. I also think that there's plenty of Asian Americans who either a: have supportive parents or b: don't have supportive and don't care and they'll still do it anyway.

### **Social Media and The New DIY Generation of Music**

When we began to talk more about how the participants got into music and how they continued their careers a common theme was doing things themselves. Grace, Victoria, and Elise all produce their own music and all of the participants are hands on in getting their own music or other's music out to the world. Brian notes that:

Now with the advent of social media and ideas being shared I think that the cultural influence of being stoic and not pumping yourself too much is going away. Because the way we communicate as a whole is different. Social media by nature is self-promoting everything you're doing, so I think that this will probably lead to more representation as people graduate and enter this industry.

Many of the participants release their music on their own and do not need to rely on labels to help them share their music. Elise notes:

Back then a label would dictate whether or not you would get big, but now it's become more of a democracy. The internet made it freer for artists to put out their music and reach their fans.

With this new day and age of technology and social media, many of the participants have ways of releasing their own music without the intermediary of a label or external help through websites like SoundCloud and YouTube. Claire stated in her interview that some of her earliest memories of Asian American artists were through YouTube and it was a way for Asian American musicians to get their music out into the world for people to see.

### **Mentorship**

A big underlying theme of the interviews was the importance of mentorship. Many of the female participants noted that having mentorship and solidarity with other women in the music industry has helped them be able to see themselves. However, since most of the women they work with aren't Asian American there is still this slight lack of understanding. Claire noted that:

I've been really fortunate over the last few years or so to be able to work with powerful women, but they've been white women and they're never going to know what I've been through or where I'm coming from. It's been cool to have that solidarity with them though, and even though my area is very male dominated it's also nice to have it with other people of color.

Elise added onto that in her interview as well:

We need more organizations, and we need people to come together. We need Asian American industry people to get together so that we can talk, share experiences and gain opportunities. I think on the similar trend of women in music, there needs to be a movement for Asian Americans. I really think building a community is the most important thing. Once you have a big movement and people working together, you can't be ignored.

Elise also noted:

The role of a mentor isn't just handing down knowledge and skills, but also encouragement. This is not an industry for the weak of heart. So, to have a mentor that believes in you and tells you to keep going is almost more important because it is so easy to get discouraged when you don't have a role model to look up to.

When Brian and I were talking about this topic he added that mentorship and joining together is a big part of what he wants to do and does. He is currently working to host a panel of Asian Americans in the music industry through ASCAP for them to be able to connect with other Asian Americans. He stated:

It would be great to somehow give back and be a resource for the community, somehow. Hopefully this [his panel], will be the first step in building something, whether it be a series of speaker events or where a group of industry professionals can be connected with each other and help out the younger the professionals.

### **Stereotypes and Microaggressions**

In the interview questions I asked the participants if they had experienced any trials during their careers so far and while this led to a few different issues, one of the main issues was stereotypes or microaggressions. Claire stated in her interview:

Stereotypically, Asian women are seen to be a lot more submissive, quiet, and reserved, so a lot of people try to overpower me and talk over me and I'm not going to sit there and accept that, because I'm not that kind of person. People I work with will sometimes poke fun at me or make stereotypical jokes and it's things like that you face every single day. I'll still get questions like 'where are you really from' or 'are you from North or South Korea', so the ignorance is still definitely there, and it is something I face quite often.

Victoria also added in her interview:

One time I was playing a show and we were doing rehearsal. There was one other Asian American girl bassist in another band also rehearsing, and the tech people kept mixing us up and kind of not being apologetic about it. They were being like ‘no, no, she’s this one’ and feeling other that way was definitely not fun when we were just trying to do a job. There have been other moments when sound guys will be like ‘do you play cello?’ based off of my instrument and I’m like, no, have you seen what a cello and a bass guitar look like even inside their case. You should know that if you’re a professional sound guy and I know it’s definitely because I’m Asian. Moments like that throw me for a loop, because we’re already stressed trying to figure out soundcheck and I have to worry about this whole other thing.

Elise also shared:

Sometimes going into rehearsal people would assume that I can’t really play anything besides really basic pop or classical and that’s it. One time we were supposed to play this intro which was more Gospel/R&B and this guy was going around to all of the musicians in the band saying they could play it and he turned to me and said ‘I don’t think you can play this.’ I was like excuse me because I knew I could play, and it turned out that I learned it faster than anyone else in the band. It’s so maddening that people think you can’t play something because of your ethnicity.

Brian added in his interview that when his band was first doing interviews in the UK they would ask them where they were actually from and assumed they hadn’t been born in the United States and that they were just based there. He also noted that during those interviews they would refer to them as Chinese even though him and his brother are Filipino.

### **Genre Matters**

I found that many of the participants began their study of music in the classical realm and then moved on to popular music genres. Brian, Claire, and Victoria were all in the Alternative/Indie Rock genre, while Elise and Grace were more in the Pop/Indie genre. Many of the common points were that there weren't many Asian Americans in their respective genres and at times they would be the only ones in the room. Elise noted that when she was studying classical music there were a few Asian musicians she could look up to, but when she looked at Pop there were none. Additionally, some of the participants would receive stereotypical comments that they should be in the Classical genre rather than popular music genres.

### **Looking Ahead**

When looking ahead many of the participants had a bright outlook on their future and the future of music. Whether it be because of current pop culture with K-Pop and movies like Parasite or Crazy Rich Asians making a big wave or because of the changing technological landscape, everyone had high hopes for their future. Many of them want to start their own companies like Elise who stated:

I want to eventually start my own A&R company and give a hand to those kinds of artists and producers who really need an outlet and need connections. I really like pairing up songwriters, producers, and artists. I think that's really magical and just based on their personality and stuff. I would want to start my own podcast and highlight people who have been excluded and not given a voice. I want to be a part of that movement of just helping people out who don't usually get that help.

Brian also expressed that he wishes to continue to further his pursuit in making more panels and connecting music industry professionals with new artists and songwriters while at ASCAP. Claire mentioned in her interview:

Something I really want to accomplish in the future is adding more representation. I would love to be a source of representation for someone else. For someone who's sitting in high school wondering 'what do I want to be?' and someone who does want to be in the industry and doesn't have any representation. I would love to be a source of representation and a resource for that next person.

### **Advice for Future Creatives**

Participants were also asked to share any advice they had for people who are looking to pursue a career in music.

Brian's most important advice was to not be afraid and stay true to yourself:

Know the business you're getting into and don't be afraid to market yourself. It's a relationship business so know how to further your own profile but doing it in a good way and being supportive of others. If you take that approach, you'll have people wanting to work with you. When it's all said and done do you trust the people you're working with and the more people who trust you the opportunities you'll have presented to you that you would not even think of. Have a backup plan, so that if you have to take a break, you'll have something to support you and stabilize you and you can still make music. The main things: have a backup plan, always be two steps ahead, and be a good person and people will gravitate to you.

Claire had similar advice in her interview:

Try not to get discouraged, try not to let the stereotypes get to you and just keep working. At the end of the day you know your own worth and if you know you're capable of doing something then you shouldn't let other people tell you you're

not. At the end of the day if you're a good worker and good at what you do your culture, or your identity shouldn't stop you from doing it if anything it should inspire you and add to the 'flavor.'

In her interview Grace shared a similar sentiment "Do it! Keep an open mind about how it will all happen... just don't give up." When asked about her future in music Elise also shared that she hopes she can be an inspiration to aspiring creatives by saying "You can make music too. You don't have to be afraid, just do it."

At the end of her interview Victoria added:

Just do it and take the jump. Find mentors either other Asian Americans or other POC's to share their experiences and to help guide you. It's best to have people who can understand your experiences and can share with you what it is like.

## **Quantitative Data**

From the beginning of 2018 to the end of 2019 I found 299 artists who were signed under the three major companies. I analyzed the results that were gathered by finding the percentages of which genre was signed the most and from there which ethnicity/race was signed most per genre.

I separated the genres by Billboard's major charts which are Pop, Country, Rock, R&B/Hip-Hop, Latin, Dance/Electronic, Christian/Gospel, Classical, and Jazz. In my research I did not find any Christian/Gospel artists who had been recently signed so that genre was not included in my data.

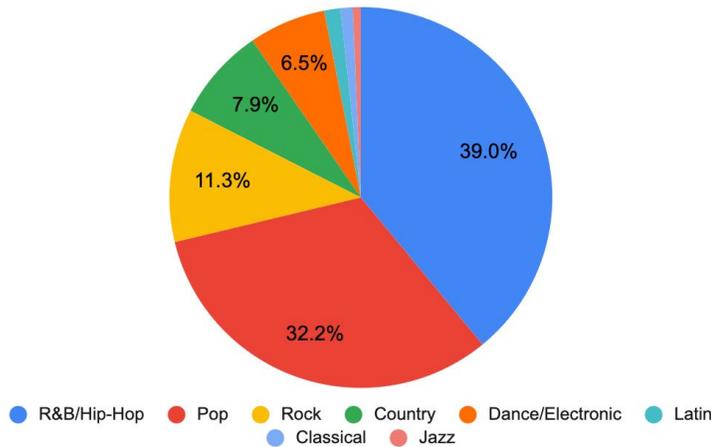
When finding artists' ethnic identity, I ultimately decided to use both the race and ethnic categories used by the census since Hispanic/Latinx is not considered a race. The categories I

ultimately ended up finding were white, black or African American, Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, and individuals who were of multiple races or ethnicities and groups/bands who were made up of multiple ethnic identities. For artists who were of multiple races and ethnicities I noted them with both identities, for groups with multiple ethnic identities I categorized them as “Groups W/ Multiple Ethnicities”, and for Asian artists who were foreign groups, such as K-Pop groups, I categorized them as Asian (Foreign-Born).

### **Recently Signed Artists by Genre**

Based on the genre categories I split the data into, the two biggest genres were R&B/Hip-Hop, with 39.04%, and Pop with 32.19%. The least signed genres were Jazz, with 0.68%, and Classical, with 1.03%. According to a study done by Nielsen (2020) at the end of 2019, R&B/Hip-Hop had the most share of total volume across formats, including streaming, digital, and physical sales, with 27.7%. The next highest is Rock with 19.8% and Pop with 14.0%. From looking at music consumption across genres it shows why 39.04% of artists signed between 2018-2019 were under the R&B/Hip-Hop genre.

Percentage of Artists Signed per Genre

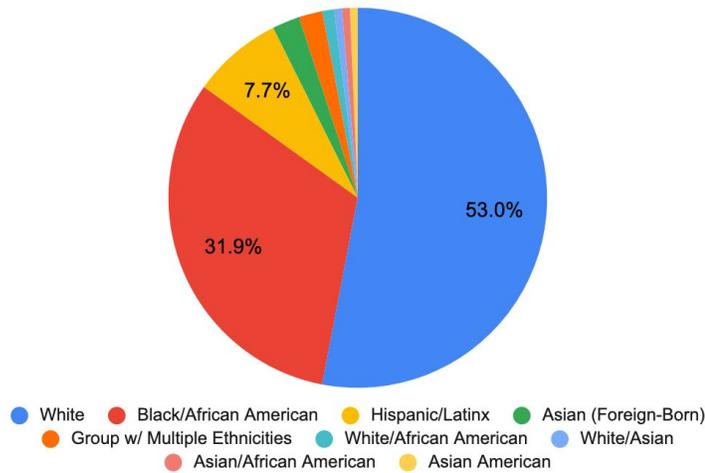


### Recently Signed Artist by Ethnicity

From what genre of artist was most popular I then analyzed what percentage of the artists were under each ethnicity/race. From my results I found that 53.02% of the artists were white, 31.88% black/African American, 7.72% Hispanic/Latinx, 2.35% Foreign-Born Asian, 2.01% groups with multiple ethnicities, 1.01% white/African-American, 0.67% were Asian-American, 0.67% Asian/African American, 0.67% white/Asian. If we look at the United States population by ethnic makeup we see that white, non-Hispanic/Latinx, make up 60.4%, Hispanic/Latinx 18.3%, black/African-American 13.4%, and Asian 6% (Census.gov, 2018). When comparing the United States population data to the data found from recently signed artists it is shown that it correlates with 53.02% of recent signees being white and 60.4% of the United States population being white, non-Hispanic/Latinx. However, we then see a disconnect with 18.3% of the population being Hispanic/Latinx but only 7.72% of recent signees

being Hispanic/Latinx and 6% of the population being Asian but only 0.67% of recent signees being Asian-American.

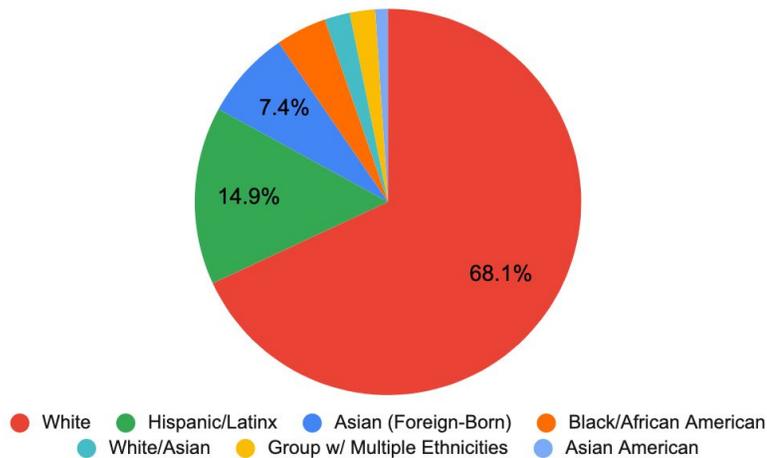
Percentage of Artists' Ethnicity



### Recently Signed Artists Ethnicities in the Pop Genre

After finding those two sets of data I found the percentage of each ethnicity/race in Pop music. The majority of Pop music was 68.09% white, 14.89% Hispanic/Latinx, 7.45% foreign-born Asian, 4.26% black/African American, 2.13% white/Asian, 2.13% groups with multiple ethnicities, and 1.06% Asian-American. We see that a majority of recently signed Asian artists in the Pop music genre are foreign-born Asians, mainly consisting of K-Pop groups, with 7.45% compared to 1.06% Asian-Americans. From the recently signed artists Asians are most represented in the Pop genre compared to other genres from the data.

Percentages of Artists by Ethnicity in Pop Music



### Discussion

When we are looking at the entertainment industry and this data it is important to keep in mind that the media landscape is changing as Asian media becomes more prominent in American culture and an important question is will this data change in a few years? Even in just a year? How can we ensure that the landscape continues to change?

Many of the interview participants felt that while they had not seen representation growing up it gave them a place to give representation to other future aspiring creatives. While others felt that since they had not seen themselves they did not know if they could find a place for themselves. There was a main idea that even though they had not seen anyone like them in major media, they felt solidarity with our groups of minorities as they came into the industry. All of the female participants stated that having other women in the industry to relate to and have as mentors helped them navigate the industry better.

When looking at familial pressures there was a mixed response from the participants. One of the participants stated that her parents were not very supportive and her family was against her pursuing a career in music, while the others felt that their parents were very supportive and only concerned about subjects such as them having a backup plan. They all cited that the difference between Asians and Americans played a part in why Asian immigrant parents and families were against the idea of careers in music. Brian stated that he thought the stoicism of Asian culture did not translate well to creative industries like music since it went against what those cultures thought their children should be.

They all mentioned having experienced some kind of stereotyping or prejudice based off of their ethnicity during their careers. Many of them recalled being called “Chinese” even though none of them were of Chinese descent and being asked if they were actually from the United States or somewhere else. None of them stated it deterred them from continuing their pursuit in their respective fields, but it was a bit jarring for them all and tiring.

An interesting result I found was that while many of them were glad that K-Pop artists such as BTS were gaining fame and there was Asian representation they felt that they still could not relate to them. They felt a disconnect to K-Pop groups since they did not understand the Asian American experience and their music did not relate to them in that aspect.

Overall the participants had a bright outlook for their careers and the industry. They all wanted to make a change in the industry, as well as help other aspiring Asian American musicians, reach their goals. They were all continuing to pursue their careers, and many were trying to find ways to unite other Asian American artists together to find bonds and communities to build awareness.

In conjunction with my results from the interviews, my current findings from record companies show that there is a lack in the representation of Asian American artists signed. I believe that there is an ability to continue to expand research into this subject. The research I found was based off of a small group of artists in the industry, so if there were to be future research a wider group of artists would be necessary to gain a better idea of the music industry as a whole. This data I believe still gives us a good starting point to see which artists major labels are looking for and also to see how in the future these trends may change, and which genre's Asian American artists are leaning towards.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This data had both qualitative and quantitative data, and I tried to gather as much of a diverse sample size as possible and analyze a range of artists signed to major record labels. However, I believe there can still be a wider range of participants used, ethnically and geographically, and also a wider range of data gathered from record labels.

Given the time constraint, I was not able to interview as many participants nor gather as much data from records labels as I would have liked. I narrowed my criteria to East and Southeast Asian Americans due to the time constraint, so I realize my sample size does not include all of Asian Americans. I believe that some of the most important research that should be done is to widen the range for record label research, analyzing consumer behavior and seeing if and how that impacts representation, as well as looking to see how levels of familial acculturation affects their view on the music industry.

**Conclusion**

It is important that we continue to analyze the quickly evolving Asian American landscape in the American music industry and see how it impacts other parts of the entertainment industry. After interviewing five participants discussing their history with representation in music, their culture and family outlook to music, and their experience within the industry, they all show a positive outlook for Asian Americans in the music industry. By discussing the wide range of issues that affect Asian American musicians today, ranging from stereotypes and racism to familial and cultural stigma, society will be able to better understand the Asian American experience in American pop culture. There is still much more that can and should be done, but by having industry professionals, such as the ones I interviewed, starting this conversation and pushing for change I believe we can be on the right path.

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