

W KOREA MAGAZINE AUG. 2024 INTERVIEW (NCT JAEHYUN, AESPA KARINA)

NCT JAEHYUN:

<W Korea> You must have had to get up early this morning. What time did you go to bed last night? Around 3 AM. I slept about five hours. Compared to my average sleep time these days, I slept quite a bit.

On July 15th, NCT 127's 6th full album "Walk" will be released. I've been getting a feel for it by watching the pre-release content on your YouTube channel. Is everything almost ready now? During the day, I'm filming promotional videos for the team's comeback, and at night, I'm practicing for my solo album. I'm releasing a solo album soon as well. I'm preparing for both simultaneously, day and night.

In the meantime, you attended the 28th Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival (BIFAN) a few days ago. Your movie "You Will Die After 6 Hours" was officially invited to the "Korean Fantastic: Feature Film" section. Didn't you participate in the GV with the audience after the screening? That's the fun part of the film festival. I couldn't make it due to my schedule. Instead, I attended the opening ceremony. I greeted everyone on the red carpet with our movie team.

You sent an OK feedback almost immediately after receiving the script for the movie? Oh! How did you know? I haven't told that story publicly.

The director mentioned it in the news. The movie will be released soon. The title is quite impactful: "You Will Die After 6 Hours!" When I read the script, it flowed smoothly. It unfolds with the character "Junwoo," who has foresight, telling "Jeongyoon," played by actor Park Joo-hyun, "You will die 6 hours from now." I play Junwoo. It's mysterious and suspenseful throughout since you can't figure out Junwoo's connection to the death until the end. I found Junwoo's journey with Jeongyoon very intriguing, which made the role appealing to me.

After working on your first movie as an actor, you immediately attended a film festival. How was your experience on set? After finishing the filming, I felt a sense of healing. I need to think more about why I felt that way.

Healing? The movie's story and concept are not very ordinary, so it might have been challenging. What kind of time did you spend that made you feel healed? Think about it now. Hmm... I worked with people who were genuinely passionate about the film. For example, I vividly remember the cinematographer. There wasn't a rail for the camera movement, so he was shooting while riding a board with wheels. When filming scenes on the road, he shot from a vehicle with an open roof. Compared to big-budget movies, ours was a small film. I learned a lot from the dedication of everyone working together as one to create this project.

As a singer, you often work individually, but as an actor, you must collaborate with many people. That's a significant difference. Is that so? I found the two to be quite similar. I'm still in the early stages of learning about acting. Dance, singing, acting... they all seem connected. It's the same with today's photo shoot. There's something similar in working on photos.

That's an interesting insight. You've discovered commonalities rather than differences through your experiences in different fields? I've learned two main things. From my trainee days to now, I've realized that improving and getting better comes down to a small margin. But I think I can develop my acting by applying what I've felt from dancing to acting and trying out what I've expressed here. In that sense, they are interconnected. For example, when shooting scenes that require body movements, the director trusted me more because I'm used to using my body through dancing. When we got good results that way, I felt the connection.

Dance, singing, acting, and photography all require an artist's unique expression. Yes. The second thing I felt is just that. Even as a singer, I think I was always acting when necessary. Not just dance and singing, but also in music videos, photo shoots, and stage expressions.

When you experience and realize something new through your work, you find fun even in the small things, right? I've always focused on things I like and didn't pay attention to things I didn't like. Fortunately, I find joy in what I'm doing now. By doing various things together, I discover slightly different kinds of fun. Looking back, even as a trainee, when singing didn't go well, I danced, and when dancing was tough, I tried other things.

There must be more subtle fun points you feel while working. There's a thrill in doing something unconventional. When the outcome of the attempt is good. It's good to do a better concept that you liked and pulled off well, but trying something different and getting good results gives me a bigger thrill.

What would be something unconventional for Jaehyun? Something that doesn't just look cool? Do you like charms that are a bit unpolished? Exactly! Those things! I don't know if I should call it wit. It's nice to look cool in posed photos, but sometimes it's fun when the photo captures the person in a certain situation. Or when an unplanned attempt in front of the camera results in a fun scene, I love it.

A handsome young man dreaming of showing not just a perfect, cool image but something else... Have you heard that you have a good face for acting? No.

What do your parents say about your appearance? My mom seems to look up more about me than I do. She sometimes comments, "You looked pretty at this time," or "I didn't like this." And she also says, "You look better on screen."

I'm curious about your mother's thoughts on your upcoming activities and our photoshoot. The title track of NCT 127's new album is "Walk." How well do you think you match with old-school hip-hop? I'm not sure if I suit hip-hop, but I do listen to that genre among many others. I don't listen to hip-hop with the intention of doing it, but I listen to various music like R&B, pop, soul, hip-hop, etc. I enjoy trendy music, but I also like very old songs.

When you say "very old," how far back do you mean? As far back as the 1970s? I also listen to music from the 1980s to the 2000s. I occasionally listen to Yoo Jaeha's songs too. I collect LPs because I enjoy finding old music.

Your solo album must naturally reflect your tastes. Judging from the solo track you pre-released during this year's Seoul Jazz Festival or the solo songs you released last and the year before, I guess you're inclined toward easy listening. The lyrics show a lyrical side too. I participated only in the lyrics for "Forever Only," and since I wanted to include my story, the lyrics matched. For "Horizon," I participated in both lyrics and composition to reflect more of my color. I always think I should work directly to include myself in the music. So, the music I usually listen to and the music I was particularly into at the time of working on the album all influence it. There are songs I worked on long ago and recent ones. It'll be an album that can express me and reflect my tastes. Since it's my first solo album, I hope it includes a variety of colors I can express.

While working on your solo album, you must have looked deeper into yourself. What's your favorite thing about yourself? It might be awkward to say it yourself, but... Oh, I'm not awkward. There is something I like. I think I'm someone who can distinguish between when I need to be mature and when I can be childlike. It's not intentional, but it happens naturally. I hear from members, "You really seem like a kid," and also "You seem reliable." It means I can be both. When I hear that, I fully understand what it means, and I like that about myself.

The NCT 127 album reflects on the path you've walked and reaffirms the way forward. Looking back over the past eight years of activity, what major lesson remains? Just to do your best each moment. Around the time of the second or third album, you tend to have a lot of worries. "I should have done better as a trainee." "I should have prepared this more." But I have no regrets so far. Both I and the members have always done our best during team activities.

I often ask those who work in groups, what do you think is the most necessary and important point for a group to last long? I'd love to hear what others say about this! I think, first of all... fitting well together is important. Whether it's musical tastes, harmony on stage, preferred concepts, or tastes, being well-matched as singers allows for good musical exchanges. Or fitting well as people, not just professionally.

Are all the members' contacts saved on your phone? Of course. And I'm not just talking about our team, but in general. Thinking more about it, experiencing "ups and downs" together as a team is necessary. Experiencing career highs together and going through slumps together.

You mean, not fighting individual battles or acting individualistically, but sharing the fate of the team? Like riding the waves together? Fighting individual battles or having individualistic tendencies is fine, but going through good or bad situations as a team is important. The more such experiences pile up, the longer the team will naturally last.

Sharing both joy and pain alike can make the bond stronger. Is there a fun attempt you'd like to make someday? Regardless of realistic conditions, just imagine. Somehow NASA comes to mind. I'm not sure what specifically I could do with them, but it would be fun to explore collaboration while asking about what they know. On a realistic stage... I'd like to do a dinner show when I'm older.

NCT Jaehyun and a dinner show? Wow, I can already start imagining it. A dinner show. If my passion remains until then (laughs).

AESPA KARINA:

<W Korea> **You must have almost fallen asleep like you were knocked out last night. You had the Seoul performance of your second world tour "Sync: Parallel Line," right?** Yes. The world tour, which continues until early next year, just started. After the performance yesterday, we had a team dinner.

What was on the menu? It had to be samgyeopsal (pork belly). We ate an incredible amount (laughs).

It's been exactly a year since the last world tour "Sync: Hyper Line." In game terms, this is "Round Two." Was it a time to feel your growth for sure? Definitely. During the first concert, it felt like I was just following directions. But this time, there were few parts we weren't involved in. We decided on the set list together and were actively involved in stage production. For my solo stage, it was initially planned to be just choreography, but at the last minute, I suggested adding silhouette cuts. It was an device added on the day of rehearsal. It must have been a difficult request, but they kindly accepted it.

The stage video for your solo song "Up" in this concert became a hot topic on YouTube. This comment received a lot of support: "SM should release the audio quickly." Haha, I think the company viewed it positively too. Not just my solo stage, but other members' solo stages were also so good that there will probably be discussions about how to release them in the future. "Up" was my first attempt at old-school hip-hop, which I've always wanted to try. Until now, I've mainly done EDM, and above all, I love hip-hop dance. This time, it felt like the choreographer really went all out with the choreography. It was like, "The stage is set, now break it down with dance!"

This year alone, you are touring 14 cities, and early next year, you'll expand to the Americas and Europe. In a way, you're at starting line of a super long race. That's right. I already miss Korean food and worry about how busy it will be, but I'm the type who enjoys myself the most when I'm abroad. Whenever I get free time, I definitely go sightseeing. My manager struggles because of me.

What do you usually do for fun? I visit all the famous tourist spots in that country. Sometimes my manager tells me to avoid crowded tourist areas, and I cheerfully respond, "Then I'll do my hair and makeup myself and go out prettily!" (laughs)

In the documentary about your first world tour "Sync: Hyper Line," there was an interesting part. Right before going on stage, you said something like a pledge: "Please let me perform confidently." What does a confident stage mean to you? I get extremely nervous before every performance. My hands often get sweaty from nerves, and backstage, I habitually ask the members, "Shall we run away?" When I'm nervous, my mind goes blank, so I'm the type who has to practice twice as much as others. On the first day of last year's world tour, I made many mistakes on stage. It was so stressful that I monitored it until dawn and went on stage on the second day like a different person. I think I need to be confident and sure of myself to enjoy the stage more.

In past interviews, you mentioned that your debut stage with "Black Mamba" was the most confident stage. Even now, I'm still dissatisfied with it. But back then, it was probably our best effort. It was during the pandemic, so we had to perform without an audience, just facing the camera lights. I still remember the pressure I felt then. Being the first girl group from SM in six years, we drew a lot of attention. Perhaps we had to prove something with that stage. Looking at it now, the dance and gestures seem awkward, but I love the atmosphere. I can feel the venom from the members. Some of them even bled because the stage costumes rubbed against their skin. But they still looked beautiful to me. It makes me feel like saying, "Oh, you worked hard."

Can a confident stage be defined as one that isn't embarrassing to yourself? Yes. In fact, there were many embarrassing stages. Ones with vocal mistakes or choreography errors. Even if the audience forgets such mistakes over time, I remember them. When my family watches those videos, I say, "Please watch it when I'm not around!" One mistake feels huge to me, so I strive to be more perfect.

Do you set high standards for yourself? It seems so. In the past, I struggled with it a lot. I was very harsh on myself and lenient towards others. I often silently endured situations where I was harmed by others. But recently, I think I've changed in a healthier direction. Now, I say "No" when something isn't right. I also try to express my feelings as they are without hiding them.

What triggered the change? The members had a big influence. All four of us are very honest. We share our innermost thoughts without hesitation. For example, we say things like, "I don't like this," "I wish this would change," or "That expression doesn't look good on stage." We even talk about feeling jealous, saying, "I'm envious of this about you." We're also honest with the staff we work with. Because of that, they cherish us very much. Senior artists often say it's rare to meet such staff. I think the environment around us was a key factor in my change.

You recently completed your first full album activities safely. As it was your first full album since debut, you must have prepared it with a different level of intensity. That's right. Just look at the music video for "Armageddon"... (laughs).

It was said that the music video used CG almost every second, and people even commented, "I felt bad watching it for free, so I bought the album." Haha, that's right. It was the longest we've ever filmed a music video. I think we shot for 4-5 days. I'm grateful. Anyway, it shows that the company trusted us enough to invest boldly in terms of cost and quality. The preparation process for this album was definitely different. We had many meetings. It was the first time we prepared so systematically and intensively. We promoted with two title tracks: "Supernova" was new and exciting, and "Armageddon" came out as well as we expected.

You recently made headlines with your remark on a YouTube web show, you said "I didn't expect 'Supernova' to be this popular." Before the album came out, we talked among ourselves. We thought "Supernova" would be liked by the public, and "Armageddon" would be appreciated by people in the field. We thought people would react differently to the two songs. "Supernova," with its fresh elements, would get responses like "It's fun," and "Armageddon" would have intriguing elements for industry insiders like "Wow, the choreography," "Wow, the sound," "Wow, the CG." Both are good, but as artists, we leaned more towards "Armageddon."

What new things did you learn from this activity? We've had a clear concept since our debut. Having a distinct concept is good, but sometimes it feels like we're trapped by it. Some might think, "They can only play with their concept." But last year's "Spicy" activities felt like a breath of fresh air. Until then, we were stuck in the avatar concept, but it felt like we landed in the real world temporarily. "Spicy" opened up our perspective. From then on, we participated more actively in the production process, suggesting ideas like "How about incorporating this into the concept?" or "Wouldn't this sound fit us better?" This year's <Armageddon> activities made me feel certain about our team's color. Now I don't doubt it. I believe, "It's our music because we're doing it."

The strength of <Armageddon> was that it showed a kind of perseverance. These days, easy listening music is mainstream in the K-pop scene. But Aespa gives the impression of pushing forward with the "metallic taste" they've stuck to since debut. That's right. We walk our own path (laughs). I don't think we need to abandon our style. I believe if we walk our path, there will be people who follow. And I think what we do best is that "metallic taste" concept. If we suddenly came back with an innocent concept, wouldn't everyone find it awkward? Actually, we're not good at smiling at the camera... we're always glaring (laughs).

Haha, you've been on a lot of variety shows recently. Not only web shows but also Netflix's "AGENT'S OF MYSTERY" released in June. I really like variety shows. I've watched TV a lot since I was young and was a "Mudo kid." I love meeting people, moving around, and talking.

Variety shows reveal your true self, unlike the stage. Maybe that's why there are so many comments praising your easygoing personality. The comment "Karina became famous for her looks but popular for her personality" received the most likes. I feel like my ears are turning red... I'm not sure what to do with myself (laughs). My personality has changed a lot. I used to be extremely shy and only answered questions when asked. But at some point, I became more outgoing. All our members' MBTIs started with the extroverted "E," but over time, they changed to the introverted "I." Now I'm the only one left with the "E" trait. Since then, I feel like I need to entertain the others. I find myself dancing, joking, and singing in front of the three introverts (laughs).

Haha, among fans, you're known as "Kasujong" (a combination of Karina and the actor Choi Su-jong known for his dedication to his wife). Fans see you and think of the actor famous for cherishing. I'm a "Pink Blood" to the core. I've loved SM since I was young, which is why I joined the company. I was a huge fan of Girls' Generation, f(x), and Red Velvet, so I understand fans' feelings. Knowing how the older sisters approached fans and elicited reactions like "Oh my gosh, unnie!" helps me connect with our fans.

Looking at your conversations with fans on the communication platform "Bubble," it seems like you approach them as the person Yoo Jimin rather than the musician Karina. That's right. I'm active as Karina, but I've lived longer as Yoo Jimin. So, I want to continually remind fans of that fact. I also want them to see me as Yoo Jimin, an individual.

What is the most important value in your life as Yoo Jimin? Myself. I always think about what makes me happy.

What has held Karina firmly when that value wavers? My mom. She's a nurse, but her original dream was to be a poet. She reads a lot and sends me books every month. Talking about books with her is one of my most precious times. She often writes me letters saying, "Family is always on your side. Even if we spend less physical time together, you're always in our conversations. Never forget you have a place to return to."

What is the most memorable book you've read with your mom recently? "The Kitchen of 16 Nights." It's a Chinese novel. The setting is unique. When people die, they pass through a "hell kitchen" where they can order the food they loved most in life. Reading it reminded me of my mom's love-filled dish, golbaengi someyeon (spicy whelk noodles) with lots of my favorite minari (water parsley). Nothing sustains me like my family. When I'm struggling, I remind myself, "I'm loved," "I'm precious."

It's now full summer. Do you have a dream vacation plan? I'm going to Jeju Island. I've only been there once before. I went with my dad before my debut. We saw camellias, ate black pork, and rode horses – a typical itinerary, but the memories are wonderful. This time, I want to stay at a guesthouse and mingle with strangers. It'd be great to go with the members if our schedules align, or with my sister if not.

Today, you wore the 2024 Prada F/W collection for the shoot. If you could take one outfit to your vacation spot, what would it be? A loose pink shirt. It would suit a resort well. It would look nice casually worn or over a swimsuit.

What's the question you ask yourself the most these days? "How can I be happier?" I'm constantly seeking the answer. As someone who stands in front of many people, I want to find that answer quickly and share it with everyone.