



In this photo Korean-American K-pop star Alexa (left), holds her recently won American Song Contest trophy with Christopher Del Corso, the US charge d'affaires ad interim in Seoul, at the residence of the US ambassador in Seoul.—AFP photos



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa performs during a mini concert at a television studio in Seoul.



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa sings during a mini concert at a television studio in Seoul.

## FINDING FAME... AND FAMILY? ALEXA'S KOREAN-AMERICAN K-POP DREAM

**K**orean-American K-pop star Alexa has wanted to be on stage since she was a kid, but her search for fame in South Korea was also fuelled by another reason—to help her mother find her birth family. Adopted from South Korea by an American family, her mother knows little about her birth culture nor does she speak the language. The blue-haired 25-year-old who recently won the American Song Contest—the US version of Eurovision-told AFP that eating kimchi was one of her few cultural links to her Korean heritage growing up.

That is, until Alexa discovered K-pop in 2008. “That kind of sparked my dream and my drive to become a K-pop artist,” said the Tulsa-born rising star, who has been dancing since she was two. Growing up in Oklahoma, Alexa said seeing entertainers on-screen she could identify with as a Korean American showed her “an interesting path to follow”.

At university, she took home the top prize at a K-pop competition—a trip to South Korea to film a reality show where she met executives from her future company and entered the grueling star-making training so many young hopefuls embark on. She moved to Seoul in 2018



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa records a social media message for her fans before her performance and throwing of the first pitch before the start of a baseball match between South Korean teams Kiwoom Heroes and LG Twins at the Gocheok Sky Dome in Seoul.

and having never spoken it while growing up—studied Korean at an academy for a few months, continuing her lessons by watching movies and TV shows while undergoing intensive dance classes.

### Search for family

While Alexa has found success as a K-pop idol, her quest to find her mother's family is proving to be a more arduous process, foiled by South Korea's restrictive adoptive laws. Born in Ilsan, northwest of Seoul, her mother was adopted when she was five. Like many adoptees, she would like to trace her birth family, but “the laws here in Korea are a little strict regarding if the child can find their birth parents and vice versa,” Alexa said.

South Korea places the right to privacy of the birth parent above the rights of the adoptee. The country has long been a major exporter of overseas adoptees, with hundreds of thousands sent away since the 1950s.

After the Korean War, it was a way to remove children—especially those born to local mothers and American GI fathers—from a country that emphasizes ethnic homogeneity. Even today, unmarried pregnant women still face stigma in a patriarchal society and are often forced to give up their babies. “The opposite party must be in search of the other in order for the first party to gain information,” the singing star said.

That has not happened in their case, so her mother is still unable to find Alexa's grandma. However, she has had some success through the internet and DNA testing, and found some cousins in other countries. Alexa said they haven't given up hope. “Hopefully in the future, we can find some of my Korean family here. It would be nice,” she told AFP, adding that she now considers Seoul her “second home”.

### 'Representation'

When NBC decided to put together the American version of the Eurovision song contest, Alexa—a “Eurovision fan”—was invited to enter to represent her home state. It gave her and her team a chance to bring K-pop to American audiences, and they immediately began planning. “How can we do staging, what concept would work, what would really grab the American audience while staying true to the K-pop?” she told AFP of their process.

Beyond nationality or language, for Alexa, K-pop is a commitment to concept, styling and execution—the hair and make-up, sets, staging and cinematography must be perfect. “I really

enjoy, you know, the spectacle, the art, the wonder, the beauty that is K-pop,” she said.

For her American Song Contest finale, Alexa descended from the rafters to the stage on a throne, then launched into choreography of military precision with her dancers as she sang “Wonderland”. Her win has K-pop fans applauding her for bringing the genre front-and-centre to American reality television.

She hopes the growing diversity in the industry will bring the music to more countries. “Growing up, some of the only representation that I saw for myself was Mulan, an animated Chinese character, and I'm a Korean-American,” she quipped. But since Korean bands like BLACKPINK and BTS went global, “K-pop has become such a safe space for so many kids”.

She believes the growing number of non-Korean idols within the industry is also good for her adopted home. “Korea is a rather homogenous country. So having all of these foreign idols, I think it's a really cool eye-opening opportunity for Korea as well,” she said. — AFP



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa takes part in a rehearsal with her dance crew in a dance studio of South Korea's ZB Label in Seoul.



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa performs her song 'Wonderland' with her crew during a mini concert at a television studio in Seoul.



Korean-American K-pop star Alexa poses with her trophy in a dance studio of South Korea's ZB Label in Seoul.

### From 'Anti' to 'V Live': A K-pop glossary for newbies

**N**ewcomers to the K-pop world will often find themselves lost in an online culture riddled with inside jokes, confusing terms and a unique vocabulary. AFP takes a look at some of the most common K-pop terms:

#### K-pop

Korean popular music, or “K-pop”, is the genre of music originating from South Korea. Originally sung in Korean—but now often in English—K-pop songs may have musical elements from hip hop, electronic dance, jazz or rock. It is mostly performed by boy bands and girl groups. Key components include tight choreography, high production values and original concepts.

#### Anti-fan

Also shortened as “anti”, it refers to someone who hates a particular celebrity so much that they devote their time to mocking and criticising that artist.

#### Comeback

A K-pop “comeback” means a group releasing new music or an album — with no long passage of time required. Often a multi-step process, a comeback is teased out for weeks with images, videos, and in some cases, even pre-album singles.

#### Fan chant

These are words shouted by fans during performances. A chant usually includes naming all the members of a group during the intro and then repeating specific words or lines throughout a song. The chants are often tailored to specific songs.

#### Fingerheart

A gesture of forming a small heart

shape with thumb and index fingers. It is frequently used by K-pop artists to express their fondness towards their fans.

#### Idol

An “idol” is a K-pop star, who has been trained before “debuting”—releasing their first music—through an entertainment agency. Idols can be solo artists or members of a group.

#### Leader

Most K-pop bands have a designated “leader” who is responsible for guiding

#### Sasaeng fan

The super-obsessed fan who goes over the top for the attention of their favourite K-pop artist. In Korean, “sa” means private and “saeng” means life, referring to the fans' intrusion into the stars' private lives. In some cases, this may amount to borderline criminal acts, such as breaking into their homes, stealing their personal items or information, and sending inappropriate gifts such as lingerie.



In this file picture fans watch a performance of K-pop groups during the 2022 Dream Concert at Jamsil stadium in Seoul. — AFP

and overseeing the group. The person usually starts any public introductions off and will be the first to speak at events.

#### Lightstick

Don't dismiss them as mere glow sticks. K-pop lightsticks have evolved to become symbols of the fans' devotion to their artists. They are custom-made for many groups, and fans show their unity by waving them at concerts.

#### V Live

If you want to keep up with your favorite K-pop star, “V Live” is a must. It's a livestream platform used by most K-pop idols to connect with their fans. Some upload behind-the-scenes footage, while others use it to livestream after shows.—AFP

## 'Hallelujah', a dud turned classic song, the focus of new Cohen doc

**L**eonard Cohen's song “Hallelujah” pretty much flopped when it came out nearly 40 years ago. Today, it enjoys cult status and has been performed by everyone from Bob Dylan to Jeff Buckley and Bon Jovi—even appearing in animated hit “Shrek”—in a unique evolution detailed in a new documentary film. The tune rich in religious and erotic references by the Canadian poet, who died in 2016, has made the rounds. In 2008, a gospel version of the song was performed by Alexandra Burke on the British TV talent show “The X Factor.” That year the song placed 1st, 2nd and 36th in the British music charts: the versions by Burke, Buckley and the original by Cohen himself. “I do not know of any other song with that trajectory,” said music journalist Alan Light, who wrote a book on the song called “The Holy or the Broken,” published in 2012.

### 'Snowball is rolling'

“This song took 10 years, 20 years, going through all these different versions, around these different corners and then it gains this momentum. The snowball is rolling, and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger,” Light told AFP. He spoke in New York at a showing of the new documentary “Hallelujah: Leonard Cohen, a Journey, a Song,” for which was an adviser and producer. The film shows that, at first, the work was destined for obscurity. A practicing Jew who eventually retired to a Buddhist monastery, poet-turned-singer Cohen took years to write the spiritual and image-rich lines of the song, which evokes King David, his music and his temptations.

Cohen left out dozens of the verses he had written. The Columbia record label refused to release “Various Positions,” the

LP that included “Hallelujah,” in the United States. It did come out in Europe, among other the places. Competition was stiff that year, and slow, poetic songs were not crowding the top of the charts.

“It's 1984. It's boom time in the music business. This is the year of ‘Born in the USA,’ and ‘Like a Virgin’ and ‘Purple Rain,’” Light said, referring to huge hits by Bruce Springsteen, Madonna, and Prince. A few years later, Dylan lifted the song out of the darkness with a blues version. Then John Cale, one of the founders of The Velvet Underground, covered it in 1991, followed by Buckley's in 1994.

### Bono apologizes

The documentary shows how “Hallelujah” became a feature of popular culture, with new generations discovering it in the first “Shrek” movie in 2001 and in “Sing” in 2016. In 2010, the Canadian singer K.D. Lang belted it out at the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. And 11 years later “Hallelujah” was performed again at a tribute to victims of the coronavirus pandemic, with President Joe Biden in attendance on the eve of his swearing in. Light says the song has a beautiful melody and but also lyrics open to interpretation. “If to you it's a religious song, that's there. If to you, it's a heart-break song, great, that's there. You can do that,” Light said. “There's no wrong way to do it,” he added, noting a ukelele version by US musician Jake Shimabukuro. Not all agree, however. In an interview for his book on “Hallelujah,” Light recalled how U2 frontman Bono apologized for a 1995 trip-hop version of the song he recorded, in which he talked his way through the lyrics, rather than sang.—AFP