

Coloring outside the lines

A Korean adoptee's musical journey | BY JACQUELYN WELLS

The day I met my birth mother for the first time in May 2018, she sent me home with information that blew my mind: *Your 100 percent biological brother who you've never met is also a musician like you- he's a rapper. He doesn't know you exist. I am not sure if I have the strength to tell him about you. But here is the soundcloud link to his music.*



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I learned a lot of insane and life-changing things that day, but this hit me the deepest. I didn't know why then, but I now realize why discovering my brother's music felt like the wind got knocked out of me. It's because music has always been my passion, and the only thing I have ever felt driven to do from the heart, ever since I was a child.

I am a singer, a songwriter, a producer and pianist. Music has ebbed in and out of my soul ever since I was three years old. I write songs fast when I am inspired, both melodies and words come to me so easily, and my voice has always been my rock, my raw and natural talent. At the time I learned the news of my Korean family's innate musical talent — my birthfather, uncle, and grandfather were almost all on professional levels of singing, she told me — I was barely pursuing music at all.

If 2018 was the year when all of the different dots in my life started connecting, 2019 is the year I fill in the color as the big picture starts to take shape.

The parents I grew up with supported my love for music, but they did not write or make music. I always wondered where this passion and talent came from. Over the course of my 31 years on this planet, I have recorded dozens of original songs, and performed hundreds of times at various venues, events, weddings and shows. I have acquired somewhat of a fan base, even though I just did it as a hobby here and there. From folk/acoustic, to electronic/indie-rock, hip-hop and pop, I dabble in many different genres.

I always tried to pursue other professions where I would fit into society, "normal" jobs that could make money and provide a stable,

simpler life. But every time I strayed, I would feel like I was cheating on my true love- music. Furthermore, I always felt like a failure because I never made it big, and I lived with daily regret that I never really tried all that hard, or went all-in on what most called my God-given talent. I've now learned that when I stifle my creative outlets, it causes deep unhappiness. I was not doing what I truly loved.

The day my birth mother gave me my brother's music, I stayed up all night long listening to his songs on repeat. His music was the exact genre I love, and it wasn't just good: It was dope. The beats were serious and haunting; his voice- somber, understated and full of swag. He was FLY. I felt so intoxicated by his music, and it wasn't even in English (well some parts were). I hadn't felt so energized by music in years.

A few nights later, I got a Kakao (Korean messaging app) text. "Hello, I am your brother". <insert MIC DROP>. She had finally, and unexpectedly, told him about me.

The first thing I responded was: "Hello. OMG. I am listening to your music right now. You are amazing."

He responded in the same way. He wrote that he had listened to my music and was equally blown away by the fact he had a sister and that my birth mother had shared my music with him online. For the most part, my music at that point was all somber, pretty emotional ballads. But, I had one unfinished hip-hop song on my soundcloud called *Say You Don't Love Me*, which I had written years ago. He said it was his favorite.

Interestingly, another dot that I have now connected to this ever-evolving constellation, was Heesun Lee, a Korean adoptee rapper, who I had hired to perform at the Women Cross DMZ non-profit event I was running the year prior. She had reached out to me around a month before I had met my birth mother to ask, "Did you say you write music? I have this new song I'm working on, and I want you to take a stab at the hook." This song,

Lap, has really changed my life. In the song, she wove an intricate and emotional story, centering on the complexities of women in the adoption process. In the first verse, she raps from the point of view of an adoptee. In the second verse, she raps from the point of view of the birth mother, and in the third verse she raps from the point of view of the adoptive mother.

The song is called *Lap* because it is the place where a child feels safest, and where a mother will place her baby. She asked me to fill in the blank with a chorus/refrain, and it became an emotional ballad-like outro. I went home with the track, and went straight to my piano.

I write seriously fast when inspired, and this time was no different. I wrote what would become the hook for *Lap* in an hour. At that point, I had no idea I would meet my birth family a month later, or ever at all. Still, I wanted to pay homage to the struggle and beautiful love each one of these women feels. I wanted to connect the dots and create a beautiful net where they all could fall together, even with continents between them, knowing they were all "right here" for one another. I wanted to promote healing with the idea that there is only love. "Hold me. Know me. Love me, right now, 'cause it's all we have." I think it poured out of me because I have always felt this truth inside my soul.

I had booked a singer-songwriter show in Hapjeong, weeks before the unexpected birth mother meeting. Even after meeting her and hearing from my brother, I did not mention the show, as I had not heard from anyone else in the family or inquired if they knew about me yet, and I did not want the pressure to perform in front of them before meeting them.

The night of the performance, as I prepared to go on stage, I received another message from Hyung Jin. They had just told Father about me, and found out about my show online and father insisted that he needed to see me before I left Korea. They were on their way into Seoul on the high-speed train to see me. It was just like a movie.

Before I had ever seen or spoken to my birth brothers or birth father, they walked in from the rain just in

time to see me perform my original ballads from the audience. Our eyes met. They were beautiful, somber and serious and full of *han*. They looked like me. As they sat quietly, my father's head in his hands, I performed the acoustic song *Lap* and dedicated it to my birth mother. To this day, I still have no idea how to put that moment and feeling into words.

Upon my return home to New York City, I decided it was time for me to get back to my true love, music. There was no need to keep dimming my light and delaying what was inevitable: I was meant to make music and share it with the world. It took all these events for me to realize this and see it clearly for the first time.

Hyung Jin came to visit me in New York, and we bonded for two full weeks. I felt that he really got to know the real me on my home turf. I introduced him to my younger brother, Johnny, who is also an amazing musician, and almost the same age as Hyung Jin. Johnny, also a singer-songwriter, writes and loves music in the same genre as Hyung Jin and I.

One night I asked Johnny, seriously, "Isn't it absolutely crazy that we all play and write similar music?" Johnny replied, "Well actually, it's not. Because clearly music is in your blood, and you helped shape my love for music and taught me how to play. And so, actually, it makes perfect sense."

Hyung Jin and I decided to collaborate from across the world, and finish *Say You Don't Love Me*, together. He raps in Korean, and I sing in English. It is such a unique song, a perfect crossover between K-hip-hop and my Mariah Carey-inspired vocals, with both English and Korean words. One day I hope that Johnny, Hyung Jin and I can all create music together. That would be my ultimate dream come true.

Before this recent change in my life, I only wrote songs about romantic love and heartbreak. Now I am writing songs about identity, love within families and healing. I am also dabbling more and more in hip-hop with some incredible people who have come into my life, not by chance, but because I was open and ready for them.

My friend, Jon Maxwell (AKA Dan, AKA Seoul), a Korean adoptee film director, was so moved by the song, *Lap*, that he came on board to make it into a music video. My first real life music video!

Heesun, Jon and I know this song's story is only one of thousands in the complex adoption world, but we thought it was important to share. Topics dealing with adoption and how it affects women are rarely shown in hip-hop or any mainstream media. The voices of the birthmother and adoptive mother, especially, are rarely heard. We wanted to empower women in adoption and promote healing for our community, and make people feel something. My folk-acoustic version of *Lap* is also available online, with Korean adoptee violist Lauren Nelson adding a beautiful emotional touch.

I struggled my entire life to fit in, which actually took me away from music, and away from my true self. As all of the dots in my life are slowly connecting, it's beautiful to know how much love I can create by coloring outside the lines, lines I had always tried to stay within.

Well's music is available by searching Jacquelyn Wells on Facebook, Youtube, iTunes, Spotify, and Soundcloud. The Lap music video and song is available by searching Heesun Lee on Facebook, Youtube, iTunes, and Spotify.

Instagram IDs are: Jacquelyn Wells @oohjacquelina; Heesun Lee @mshesunlee; and Jon Maxwell @cinemaheist.

Jacquelyn Wells is a Korean-American adoptee based in NYC. She is a singer-songwriter, jewelry designer, and works closely with Women Cross DMZ and the NYC adoptee organization, Also Known As, Inc. Raised in Massachusetts by her loving American family, Jacquelyn reconnected with her biological Korean family in 2018 for the first time. Jacquelyn is also a registered yoga instructor and promotes mindfulness and healing within her community. She is an avid supporter and friend of KAFSC.org.

Find her original music on: Spotify//Apple Music//Soundcloud//Youtube: Jacquelyn Wells Instagram: @oohjacquelina Facebook: Jacquelyn Wells Music