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Mike Park Interview

Ben Rogers
DePaul University

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Interviewer: Ben Rogers
Musician/Producer: Mike Park
Phone Interview: San Jose, CA/Chicago, IL
Date: 02/13/10
Start: 1:00 PM
End: 2:13 PM

Note: *The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2010 Winter Quarter as part of the **Asian American Art Oral History Research Project** conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media & Design/Director Asian American Studies.*



Mike Park performs in Kingston, UK in late Fall 2009. (Photo taken with permission from Mike Park)

Artist Bio:

In the fall of 1985, Mike Park began his journey in the music world. As a member of the now defunct Ska band Skankin' Pickle, Mike Park was able to release five full length records, tour fourteen countries, and make his mark in the independent music world.

In 1996, Park started his own record label Asian Man Records. Motivated by change and action through the power of music, Park proudly explains that he still runs his label from his parent's garage, despite having sold over 1 million albums. Asian Man Records now

supports over 50 bands, including independent heavyweights Alkaline Trio, Smoking Popes, The Queers, The Lawrence Arms, and many more.

Mike Park has also been a strong advocate of racial unity and community activism. Through his music, he has revealed insights into his Korean background. Through his music, Park hopes to tackle important issues that plague the Asian American community, as well as social and political issues that Park takes to heart.

Mike Park founded the Plea For Peace Foundation. A 501C3 non-profit organization that facilitates benefit tours, CD's, and publications backed by a strong network of bands, labels, charities, and supporters. Founded in 1999, the message is simple: "To promote the ideas of peace through the power of music". The belief that all individuals are created equal and through their efforts, a hope to create a scene of positive minded people to help bring forth action and education in the process of sharing ideas of peace and practical uses of peace in everyday life.

In December of 2008, Plea For Peace opened their first youth center in Stockton, California. A center that is open year round for kids who have interests other than sports or the normal medium that schools and peers deem normal. A center that will give youth an outlet to perform music, create art, dance, and talk to others of similar interests. And to create a safe atmosphere in a drug and alcohol free environment.

In November of 2003, Park released his first solo record entitled *For the Love of Music*. 2004 saw Park on the road for the first time since 1996, touring with artists such as Cursive, Alkaline Trio, and Anti-Flag. The follow up release entitled *North Hancock Falling* was released on August 23rd, 2005.

In 2006 Park welcomed his first child, daughter Maggie Elizabeth Park to the world. A year off from music and then a second child in 2008 (Moses Young Park) brought much change for Mr. Park, but his newfound love for fatherhood has given him new direction as he prepares to release two records in 2010, including a children's album, full of original songs inspired by his own experiences as a parent.

(Artist Bio taken from www.mikeparkmusic.com; edited by Ben Rogers)

Also consulted:

www.asianmanrecords.com

www.pleaforpeace.org

Phone Interview Transcripts:

Ben Rogers: I understand that you came to America from Korea when you were just four months old. What was your first memory of America?

Mike Park: I certainly remember the first time I went to Disney Land in Anaheim with my parents. I think I was 5. There's a picture of me at my parents house somewhere with Mickey Mouse, although I didn't look very interested in him. The funny thing is, I didn't

go to a Disney park again until I was on tour in Japan in 2001. They have a Disney theme park in Tokyo.

BR: What is it like for you to tour in Asian Countries? And have you been back to Korea at all?

MP: I visited Korea once when I was 6, but I don't remember much. I didn't go back to Asia again until I was on tour. I think it was 1999 or 2000 that I returned to Asia. I have only been to Korea and Japan, but the music scenes in the two countries are so different. It was kind of disappointing. I see Korea as my home country, but the music scene is so much bigger in Japan. I felt more welcomed there. I was kind of disappointed because Korea is my home country. But, it's cool to be in Korea and play shows in front of family and in the city and country of my birth. It's still a foreign place to me, which makes it fun and exciting.

BR: Do you speak Korean?

MP: No. I released an album in Korea in 2002, but it was hard to do interviews and create a buzz around the album because of the language barrier. All in all, it didn't do so hot.

BR: How many times have you toured through Japan/Korea?

MP: I think I've been to Japan 7 times and Korea 3 times. The tours have always been separate. Mostly I just play a festival in Korea while I'm there and visit family. Japan is more of a business trip from my end.

BR: Do you feel your Korean/Asian Identity has influenced your music at all?

MP: Not really, other than the jarbled Korean lyrics I attempt to throw into my solo material every once and a while (laughs). I think it's more the experience of witnessing racism and violence and being strongly opposed to both of those things that have influenced me. Maybe it's the experience of being a minority in America, but I don't carry the 'Asian' tag with me whenever I perform. I just perform and let people know how I feel.

BR: So you don't view yourself as a spokesperson for Korean or Asian-Americans?

MP: No.

BR: So let's rewind a little bit. How did you get interested in music?

MP: It was in high school. I saw a band called Fishbone play once. I was inspired to play after that.

BR: I assume Fishbone is a Ska band?

MP: Ya, you could say that.

BR: What was it like growing up? You were born and raised in San Jose right?

MP: Correct, I've lived in San Jose most of my life. It wasn't too bad growing up here. I realized I was different from some of the other kids, but there is a large Asian population here and everyone got along pretty well. Music was what brought me together with other people during my teen years.

BR: What were your first bands like?

MP: Very bad (laughs). We tried to be punk. Fast, fast, punk. Nothing ever really came of my high school bands. It was fun though. I didn't experiment with horns until Skankin' Pickle.

BR: When/How did Skankin' Pickle start?

MP: I started Skankin' Pickle in 1988 with some friends I met in college. We did a lot of hard work promoting ourselves and people started to take notice. Remember, the late 80s and early 90s was a pretty good time for Ska music, relative to today.

BR: Talk to me about the Skankin' Pickle song *Ice Cube, Korea wants a word with you?*

MP: That was in response to Ice Cube's song *Black Korea*. We had some songs that dealt with racial unity, but for the most part we were just a fun band. Politics weren't our forte I mean, who's going to take you seriously when you're called Skankin' Pickle? We just thought it was ignorant for someone in such a high profile to write a song that can judge an entire race based on a few bad experiences he may or may not have had with a couple of Koreans in LA.

BR: So how did Asian Man Records get started?

MP: I started it in 1996. I wanted to use the label as a way to release my own music. We were basically doing all of our own stuff in Skankin' Pickle, so I thought I could make a record label work.

BR: Is it true the label is still run out of your parents' garage and that you only have two employees?

MP: Yes indeed! We've sold over 1 million records with that formula, so why change?

BR: You make a good point. So why did you call it 'Asian Man Records?' Did you ever think that the name would turn off non-Asians from your label?

MP: No, I never really thought it would turn people off...but maybe it has. That's a good point. I don't know. I called it that because I wanted to let people in the punk rock community know that there were people of color on the scene as well. Punk rock is an industry dominated mostly by whites, like a lot of other industries. I was just trying to give the norm a kick in the butt.

BR: What in your career are you the most proud of?

MP: First, let me just say that I feel I am extremely blessed to be making and recording music for a living. I was able, through my non-profit organization *Plea for Peace*, to open up a recreation center in Stockton, CA. That is the thing I am most proud of. I've always wanted to give back, and I made it to a point that I could and it's a great feeling.

BR: What is Plea for Peace and what kind of things go on at the recreation center?

MP: I founded Plea for Peace in 1999. It's a non-profit like I said. It's committed to promoting racial and sexual unity, as well as non-violence. We sponsor a nation-wide concert tour every year, among other things. The youth center, which just opened in December, is for kids for before and after school. It offers them an outlet to be creative. We have art classes and music classes and dance classes. Gives kids a way to express themselves.

BR: Do you have plans to open more youth centers in the future?

MP: I would like to, but I don't have any specific plans. We will have to see how it goes. I'm still trying to develop the first one.

BR: What else is in store for you personally and for Asian Man Records in the near future? Is it true you are coming out with some new solo material?

MP: Yes, indeed. I've been anxious to get a new record out there. I haven't recorded a full length since 2005. I took a break from my solo career so my wife and I could welcome our two kids, Moses and Maggie, into the world, which is why I haven't been touring as much. But once I get this album finished, I'm going to get back on the road.

BR: Do you have a title picked out for the album yet?

MP: You'll have to wait a few months for it to be released.

BR: Anything else you have coming up?

MP: Yes. I'm releasing my first children's album. I've been writing some songs to play for Moses and Maggie, so I decided I should just record them onto a CD. The album is heavily influenced by my experiences as a parent. That will come out later this year as well. Being a father is such an experience and I wouldn't trade that for anything.

BR: How about with Asian Man Records? Any big releases there?

MP: Matt Skiba, you know him, with Alkaline Trio?

BR: Yes, I'm very familiar with their work

MP: I'm releasing a collection of 15 of his solo songs entitled *Demos* this summer. Andrew Jackson Jihad is coming out with a new album we are currently working on, as well as a split EP featuring Hard Girls and Kudrow. And finally, we are re-releasing the Smoking Popes first album *Get Fired* complete with new artwork. We are remastering all the original songs as well.

BR: Sounds like you've got a lot going on to keep you busy

MP: Yes, but I love it. Like I said, I've been very blessed. Making and recording music doesn't seem like a job. It's just fun. I've got a beautiful wife and two great kids and I'm excited to go back on the road for a tour.

BR: Well those are all the questions I have for you for today, thanks a lot for taking the time to speak with me.

MP: No problem. Thank you for taking an interest in my career and my music. Take care.

END