

## Interview 1: Can a Swedish boy band make K-pop?

*Excerpts from an interview by the artist Ming Wong with members of the Swedish boy band C-U-T that he is managing as part of a project for the 11<sup>th</sup> Seoul Mediacity Biennale - One Escape at a Time. The interview took place over Zoom on 12 July 2021. The members of C-U-T are Niels Engström, Aron Fogelström, Victor Fogelström, Valentin Malmgren, Caio Marques de Oliveira and Karon Nilzén.*

MING: I invited you all to be part of this project inspired by K-pop and to make an interpretation of it here in Sweden. We made this journey of discovery through the processes of making music together. I recall in our discussions that it wasn't so much that the music is Korean or Swedish, it was kind of an international sound, but through our collective work in this project, there are certain things that came out of it that could throw some light on the similarities and differences between both sides.

Would somebody like to start the ball rolling. Do you remember what we all did and how it has evolved over the past few months?

VICTOR: Yeah, for me, it was like jumping into the unknown. I really had no idea, I didn't know any of you guys so like is it going to work, like the chemistry is it going to work.

How are we going to write a song? Some of us have some experience with music but none of us are like full-fledged musicians. Then along the way it feels like everything has progressed very naturally. We had the meetings, talked about what everyone likes and I got to know everyone a bit better. And I feel like we're all on the same page but from our different directions.

MING: Victor, you played a very important role in this because you're the one who knew the mechanics behind actually producing the song. You brought this kind of a structure to the song, that you need a verse, you need a bridge, and all of these things so

bringing the language of a pop song into the picture for us to work with. This isn't the usual way of how you work, right? What have you learned from this process?

VICTOR: I don't think I've ever made a song with 6 people in it before. That was an interesting challenge. I tried to work everything out, 'cause I knew from the start, it had to be very structured. We're going for the K-pop sounds, but doing our own thing of it. OK, what's the K-pop sound? OK, it's very structured. Here's 10 seconds with this guy, 10 seconds with this guy and then there's the pre chorus. So that had to be put in my mindset at first, OK so I'm writing a song it needs to have these kind of parts, so that everyone can fit in.

MING: You brought a lot of care to balance the 6 different personalities and that's something I really appreciate.

VICTOR: Yeah, well, the core had to be that everyone has their own part, and shines through in their own way, for everything to make sense.

MING: Let's talk about the lyrics. Aaron, you were a key contributor to this aspect, but of course, it was important to get everybody on board, to get everyone's thoughts and desires in the picture. Can you say a little bit about how we came to this stage?

ARON: I think a very important point was when we took our images of joy, images that brought us joy, very personal things, we brought them up together as we sat there one evening after karaoke and I think that was very rewarding and I was really touched by the amount of intimacy that people allowed to share and myself what I allowed to share as well, and that's where I think for me, the sort of spark of lyrics came in some way.

We talked about a different sort of multiverse, different planets. What if we're from different planets. You know, that's sort of weird science fiction and sort of crazy, and it brought me to the idea of the Kaleidoscope. The sort of sparkling sensation that's very joyful, the Kaleidoscope is a toy and like this joyful representation of diversity or difference, which spoke to the idea of the boy band in itself, like bringing out the differences and bringing out the specialness of each member.

I think there was like sort of a very clear idea to use for an anthem, a kaleidoscope, like just who are we, we're kaleidoscope.

And then later on, bringing in the narrative of coming together from differences and opening up towards each other, which sort of mirrored our journey as a band. Separate planets or people embracing ourselves or being brave enough to collide and exploding into a kaleidoscope.

MING: I recall when you shared with us, the first time the draft of the lyrics, you actually included all the notes and test sentences and everything. That was actually very revealing to see how you worked as a writer, as a lyricist. Of course, in this project with the inputs from all the different people, this is really not the usual way you work, right? What did you all learn from this process of collaborating with Aaron on finding the right way to make the lyrics?

NIELS: When we discussed the lyrics at the meeting last time we were able to take the task very seriously and to sit down and discuss the first draft of the lyrics. There was all this explanation, which you would not have done if you were just to write a lyric for yourself, so it forces us to be clearer in our communication and our ideas towards each other.

MING: And what about the use of Swedish in the lyrics? Because I think we spent quite a lot of time talking about the way Swedish is used in the song.

NIELS: It's funny because it's unusual for a Swedish pop song to do that. But it's very common to do that in everyday speech in Sweden because people are so used to English from television and social media so it's very common for people to use English in their everyday language and even saying things like I don't remember this word in Swedish. So that's one aspect and the other of course, is that it's common in Korean and Japanese pop culture to throw in English words.

KARON: I think that the idea of using Swedish and English is from K-pop. Like how to do it in a different language, like how to do a Swedish take on K-pop? What is K-pop and I think we all agree that it's kind of international, the sound? It could be from like almost anywhere, it sounds like this radio pop music more or less.

And that was one thing we discovered as this is something we could use to make K-pop Swedish in some way, to use this play with the language and I think it works quite well and I think it was like because of the first draft of the lyrics that Aron did with the explanation by the side, like you could like really dig into how the lyrics was made and that made it possible to also work with.

I think that has always been quite hard when playing in a band, it's very hard to work on the lyrics with more than one person, but with this very open way to show the first draft, it was possible to actually jump into the process and like jump in to the brain of the song in some way and also like coming in maybe from a different direction, I think it worked because of this open structure.

MING: And was it a challenge to try and fit the Swedish and English together? You had to discuss a long time in order to find something in Swedish that would fit the sentence and rhyme with the English and I knew you guys struggled with this.

NIELS: We had to break it down to phonetics to just sounds, like vowel sounds. We were breaking down the words and just making sounds at points. Like what does this word sound like, never mind the spelling because that could be misleading. You think about 2 different words in 2 different languages and you think they don't fit. But then you just make the sounds and realize that you can make it fit.

KARON: I think the big challenge was like recording it, jumping between Swedish and English in one sentence was really hard, like the way you use 'R' for example, the letter 'R' is like you put it in spots in your mouth and it was really, really hard, that was the hard part of the mix of languages.

MING: Can you tell me about the recording process that you did in the studio? Some of you had more experience than others, you were trying different things out. Maybe you can share what happened at these sessions when you were recording?

VICTOR: So anyone remember the first session 'cause I don't think I remember when we recorded the demo vocals for everyone.

NIELS: You and Aron, laid all the tracks first to sort of warm up, and to guide us into how things would work. And then we sort of came up with who's doing what part as we went along.

KARON: We sang it together I remember, we played the song and everyone sang at the same time, that was quite fun actually, to see like what felt good, and what didn't, like where you could sort of place yourself in it.

VICTOR: I remember, we had to listen to everyone's voice as well. Like in this Chorus part, it's a lot of power, so we let Aaron take the "Kaleido-sco-o-ope". 'Cause I think he has the most power in the upper register.

NIELS: But that's when that whole melody came about. It was just the first take and then it was so given to have that there.

VICTOR: Yeah, I think what's very beautiful about making music is like a lot of it just comes from like in the moment. Like if we had recorded the same song the day after it probably would be a lot different.

MING: Did you all support each other in your singing style or ability because it's also not something that's easy to do in front of other people. I've heard that you all tried different ways of experimenting to sing.

VICTOR: It's very easy to get nervous, especially when singing with other people in the room. So the main idea is just to make everyone feel comfortable in the room and for everyone to be part of that vocal warming up process and just kind of being silly and showing that it's fine, like nobody here is judging. And then when somebody had any trouble with something, we all tried to help. OK, what if you do like this? Or maybe give different ideas and different approaches to try to make it work out.

NIELS: Yeah, and try it together.

VICTOR: Also yeah with different parts when someone had trouble we sang along with them, to try to motivate them to try their best.

MING: Let's move on to the shooting of the music video. First of all, it was a great location so a big thanks to Valentin for actually taking us to this place, I think this natural setting lends itself so well to the feelings in the song. Would you like to say something about that, Valentin?

VALENTIN: Stockholm is a really special in that sense that it has so many very deep natural forests very close to the city and when we started talking about potentially doing it in the woods, it was because recently, or like for a while, there's been a big culture of Stockholmers going out in the forests to party 'cause dancing and clubbing is very regulated in Stockholm.

We have to have permission for people to dance at a bar or club and that has made a lot of people take matters in their own hands since we have a lot of nice deep woods close by to the city, and a lot of people just bring out their lights and music into the woods, really, beautiful places, like people travel to Stockholm to go to these places. It's very nice settings.

You get really get a deep sense of escapism when you go to these kinds of parties like in such a magical place and be around friends.

MING: And what about this special moment between dusk and dawn in the woods. It's a kind of a magic hour and I think in the video, it's gonna be a very dreamlike sequence. Do any of you have anything to say about this special time and special place and what it means.

VALENTIN: We shot it on the longest day, the shortest night of the year was when we shot.

MING: It was a coincidence, but yes, it was the summer solstice. Is that the night when everybody goes a bit crazy? There was a full moon.

CAIO: In general, I think during the summer, people go a bit crazy. At least it's my experience since I'm living in Sweden. I don't know how you guys that have your whole life here how you experience that but since 7 years since I moved to Sweden it still is really strange for me. It's like each day is different. The sunset or the sunrise it's like a couple minutes before or after the previous day. And this has always been like, Oh my God, that's really strange.

NIELS: The constant shift you mean.

VICTOR: Yeah, I think it's a very special vibe, especially when the night is so short. It's like the sun doesn't even really go down, so it's like you're stuck in this twilight zone. It's not quite night, not quite day either and it's like you're in some kind of other space in-between some kind of limbo. I guess it just brings out this kind of magical feeling.

MING: Is there something that you've learned or discovered about yourself in the last month through this process, through this collaboration?

ARON: Yeah, it sort of also mirrors the lyrics, in some way like this question, "Are we going home or going on?" This you know it's something I myself have been sort of struggling with personally.

And this is similar to this experience in the band I think in some way in the beginning. It was a bit uncomfortable and artificial but I stuck with it because of the others like you all, and learning to trust each other and this really, I think broke through something for me like some sort of barrier.

VALENTIN: It was this constant, having a huge trust in each other, but also since it was the first time anyone of us did this, we have to be constantly questioning what we're doing and why we're doing it. Whenever someone felt uncomfortable, we make sure to bring it up.

ARON: it's not just about trusting each other, it's about trusting yourself when you feel some sort of doubt for example, that it is vital and valid to bring it up because we are all part of this so not to just let it slide if there's some friction there.

KARON: One thing that I learned was working together in a group in the field of Art 'cause it's kind of an individual form, and somehow, working together, that was a new thing for me, but also I felt it worked and I'm very happy for that, 'cause I've been missing that a little bit because for me it's mostly working in the studio on your own.

It's like OK, we're gonna make this song and we're gonna perform it and we're gonna write it and then I think it was like 2 or 3 meetings, I really didn't know where we were going or how it should work out and then suddenly something clicked and then it's like OK now everyone is on the same page and maybe even if it's unspoken we know a little bit about where this is going or where we wanna go and how we're gonna do it, it felt like we were not 6 individuals. It was more like one group working and I think that was a really good experience to see that change, like being in that process.

And also like everybody said before me like, the feeling of OK, now we're doing it, like there's no turning back, now it's on. And having the feeling that it was the right thing to do to stay. It's nice.