

The Recording Academy Voting Controversy Questions the Integrity of the Grammy Awards

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If you watched last year's Grammy Awards, you probably would've thought it was the portrait of a forward-thinking, diverse, and fun awards show. You had Alicia Keys hosting, Dolly Parton dueting with Miley Cyrus, and Janelle Monáe rocking out. But look a little closer, and you'll see a reverse-course from the 2018 Grammys, where 11 out of the 84 winners were women. Not to mention, at the time, then-CEO of the Recording Academy, Neil Portnow, said that women needed to "step up" if they want to win actual awards. It all might've been what led Drake, after winning Best Rap Song at last year's ceremony, to launch a none-of-this-matters speech before his mic was cut.

That's all to say: It's no surprise that we're at where we are now. Yesterday, Portnow's replacement as CEO, Deborah Dugan, filed a discrimination complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission after she was put on "administrative leave" by the Academy. Dugan's complaint is a sprawling document with everything from sexual harassment allegations to a claim that seriously questions the integrity of the Academy's awards voting process. Here's what we know so far.

Who is Deborah Dugan, and what has she alleged in the complaint?

After Portnow was ousted following the "step up" comments, Deborah Dugan, the former CEO of (RED), was hired as his replacement to revamp the Academy's culture. Notably, before Dugan's hiring, the Academy put together a diversity task force (led by Michelle Obama's former chief of staff, Tina Tchen), nearly two years ago after the controversy surrounding the 2018 Grammys.

In the document, Dugan makes several allegations that the complaint says were "all made possible by the 'boys' club' mentality and approach to governance at the Academy." It contains several sexual allegations, including one against Portnow himself, who had been accused of raping a foreign recording artist after a show at Carnegie Hall. In a statement, Portnow said that this claim has been investigated by lawyers, the evidence of which "completely exonerated him." Another accusation is made against the Academy's general counsel, Joel Katz, who allegedly over dinner, made "an obvious and unwelcome attempt to 'woo'" Dugan over a bottle of wine, attempting to kiss her. Katz has denied this account.

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What did Dugan reveal about the Academy's voting process?

In the document, Dugan thoroughly outlines what she claims to be the Academy's voting process for the Grammys, which was long considered by the media to be suspect. In Dugan's telling of this process, the 12,000-strong group of voting members starts by voting on the submissions. Then, the nomination committees review the top 20 selections, and narrow down those 20 potential nominations.

Dugan alleges that these "secret committees" are incredibly biased. She writes, "Board members, including those who represent or have relationships with nominated artists, sit on these secret committees," and that "the Board uses these committees as an opportunity to push forward artists with whom they have relationships." The Recording Academy has not responded to Esquire's request for comment.

How will this impact the Grammy Awards show this Sunday?

If true, this would further call into question all the Grammys in recent memory—including the upcoming results of this year's awards show, which will happen this Sunday. Unless we see any updates from Dugan and her legal team, or the Academy, it'll be interesting to see if any artists begin speaking out about the controversy in the meantime. Musicians have long been critical of the Grammys—with many opting to not even attend, in protest—but we could hear more from them now that there's more smoke surrounding the Academy's voting process. Regardless, the Academy will have to eagle-eye the acceptance speeches on Sunday—lest someone pulls another Drake.