

The Grammys' Silence on the Deborah Dugan Scandal Was Deafening

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On Sunday night, the ousted Academy president was nowhere to be seen nor mentioned explicitly. Photo: Kevin Winter/Getty Images for The Recording Academy

When Recording Academy president Deborah Dugan was placed on leave ten days prior to the 2020 Grammys, many wondered if the awards would serve as a space for artists to be vocal about inequities within the industry. Dugan's suspension came amid rumors that she was due to blow the whistle on the Recording Academy, its voting irregularities, and claims of sexual misconduct. But on Sunday night, the ousted Academy president was nowhere to be seen nor mentioned explicitly. The death of Kobe Bryant loomed over the the awards instead, leading many artists to skip the red carpet altogether. Of the few major stars running across the carpet at the 11th hour before taking their seats, none were prepared to address the controversy.

There were some outliers. Jazz musician Esperanza Spalding didn't feel as though her excitement was tainted by the controversy, but also admitted that she didn't know the details. She referred to her long career in music (she won a Grammy for Best New Artist in 2011), saying, "I've been here before when I was a kid. I'm 34 years old and I've had ups and downs in the music business, but as a musician or creative person you realize that this [the Grammys] is not a measure of anything, but it's a fun party." She added that it was possible to attend the ceremony knowing both of those things to be true.

L.A. hip-hop maestro Georgia Anne Muldrow was the most outspoken on the allegations of discrimination. "In my life it's normal, but it shouldn't be normal," she said, referring to the Academy's historically poor record of fair gender and race representation. "There's things that have to change culturally, and it's gonna express itself in an Academy, especially in the elite society." Muldrow said she was asked to sit on the original Task Force spearheaded by Tina Tchen of Time's Up. The Task Force formed in the wake of previous Academy president Neil Portnow's comments after the 2018 Grammys in which he said women needed to "step up" to be recognized by the Academy, and was intended to investigate claims of sexism and race discrimination in the nominations process. Muldrow decided she didn't want to participate because she felt there would be too much politics and not enough action. "We tried to have that Task Force and all that and couldn't get nothing done." Still, she felt it was important to appear at the awards as a visible representation of a hard-working black mother on an independent label. "It's become very difficult to make music for a living," she

said. "So many people feel like they have to be another person to matter. That's a problem. I want this mold to break, whatever it takes, whatever uprising or upheaval — that industry has to die. If this is an indication of the industry dying, I'm with it."

Onstage once the ceremony got started, host Alicia Keys vaguely made reference to the drama in the run-up to this night. "It's been a hell of a week, damn," she said. "This is a serious one. Real talk — there's a lot going on." She called for a time of "newness." "We refuse the negative energy! We refuse the old systems!"

Throughout the night, artists' visits to the media room in between speeches were scarce. The holding area was largely empty, and when Tyler, the Creator, who won for Best Rap Album, came through he picked up on the vibe: "Y'all look bored as fuck," he said to the journalists. The few artists who did come through were reticent to address the allegations. DJ Khaled attributed his Grammy win for Best Rap/Sung Performance for "Higher," featuring John Legend and the late Nipsey Hussle, to the divine. "This award is from God. This ain't about voting. This is God. It don't get realer than this. This is the real deal," he said, raising his Grammy. Tyler, the Creator said he was "half and half" on the debacle, but he did fire shots at the Academy for placing "guys that look like me" in the urban categories instead of in pop. Interim Academy CEO Harvey Mason Jr. notably did not visit the media room after the ceremony (but did open the preshow), the same room in which former Academy president Neil Portnow made his "step up" faux pas only two years ago.

The final words in the main room for the evening were again from Keys. "We got a lot to change. We got a lot to do! Keep speaking the truth," she said with a smile on her face, to a room that had largely chosen to remain apolitical.